Report on Conspiracy Theories in the Online Environment and the Counter-Disinformation Ecosystem in Estonia and Latvia

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Researching Europe, Digitalisation and Conspiracy Theories (REDACT)

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Executive Summary

REDACT Project Summary

The REDACT project analysed how digitalisation shapes the form, content and consequences of conspiracy theories, including online sociality and offline actions and effects. Rather than seeing digitalisation as a process that has universal outcomes, or conspiracy theories as the same over space and time, REDACT considered online conspiracy theories and counter-disinformation organisations in a selection of European countries. The project involved a team of 14 researchers analysing data from Western Europe, Central Europe, the Baltics and the Balkans.

Methodology

Using keywords from a range of conspiracy theory topics, the project gathered 6 million posts from Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram and Telegram between 2019–2024. The researchers used a mixture of digital methods and close reading strategies to analyse the datasets. Each regional team also conducted ethnographic interviews with key members of counter-disinformation organisations across Europe. Political, social and economic contexts were brought to bear on all of these methods and findings.

About the Authors

Researcher Mari-Liis Madisson (University of Tartu) has been studying conspiracy theories for 15 years. She has co-authored two monographs on the subject and regularly engages in public discussions through the media. Researcher Tatjana Menise (University of Tartu and Riga Technical University) initially worked on participatory culture and fan fiction, and in the past three years has focused on digital humanities and the study of conspiracy theories. Both are active contributors to scholarly debates.

Key Findings

- **In Estonia and Latvia, conspiracy theories grow from occupation and trauma:** Nazi and Soviet propaganda, surveillance and repression bred lasting suspicion and antisemitic scapegoating.
- **Post-1991 upheavals still shape Baltic conspiracy theories:** Rapid reforms, privatisation, strict EU/NATO entry demands and economic austerity fuelled lasting suspicions of hidden elites and foreign control.
- **Pandemic and war fused in Baltic conspiracy theory ecosystems:** Covid-19 united alternative medicine networks, populists and pro-Kremlin activists.
- **Baltic Russian-speaking communities sustain distinct yet interconnected conspiracy theory discourses:** They draw on Kremlin-promoted narratives and articulate experiences of marginalisation, but also overlap with far-right conspiracy theories portraying a liberal-globalist elite seeking to impose a totalitarian order.
- **Great Replacement theories in the Baltics are not widespread, but they are locally shaped:** These are tied less to Muslim immigration than to anxieties over demographic decline, cultural erosion and externally imposed values.

- **Cross-issue conspiracism:** Pandemic-era discourses extended into climate and security scepticism, warning of a covert-control society built under cover of the war in Ukraine and the AI revolution.
- **Orwellian tropes intensify conspiratorial framing:** References to *1984* resonate with memories of Soviet repression, providing powerful cultural devices that legitimise distrust and fuse disparate grievances into totalitarian threat narratives.
- **The 'mankurt' trope frames cultural obliteration:** Russian-language conspiracy theory discourses depict integration and security policies as 'mankurtisation' — violent erasure of memory — casting Russia as saviour and embedding Kremlin-directed FIMI in allegorical form.
- **The fight against disinformation meets its limits with conspiracism:** Practitioners stress that conspiracy theories function as interpretive worldviews that absorb debunking, making them harder to address than isolated falsehoods.
- **The Baltic counter-disinformation sector is active but vulnerable:** Governmental and NGO initiatives are well-developed yet strained by unstable funding, harassment and burnout.

Recommendations

1. **Develop context-specific approaches:** Tailor counter-disinformation responses to histories of occupation, small-language media, Russian-speaking minorities and geopolitical pressures.
2. **Address structural causes:** Conspiracism resonates with perceived disruption, corruption and elite estrangement from ordinary citizens; tackling these underlying drivers is more effective than treating surface manifestations.
3. **Recognise conspiracy theories as distinct from other forms of disinformation:** They function as interpretive frameworks to which identities and worldviews become attached, resisting refutation and absorbing counter-arguments.
4. **Strengthen emotional and cultural competence for analysing conspiracism:** Conspiracist use of metaphors and allegories exploits cultural memory, stirring strong emotions and shaping collective imagination; such narratives demand sharper analysis and informed responses.
5. **Build cultural resilience to FIMI:** Empower local cultural resources and narratives that reduce susceptibility to Kremlin-directed conspiracism.
6. **Don't normalise conspiratorial rhetoric:** Resist populist efforts to embed conspiracy tropes in mainstream politics.
7. **Ensure sustainable counter-disinformation work:** Move beyond precarious, short-term funding towards long-term, flexible support.
8. **Protect practitioners:** Safeguard fact-checkers and journalists through legal protection, mental health support and civic recognition.
9. **Advance collective literacy:** Go beyond fact-checking to foster civic and media literacy as a collective responsibility.
10. **Support everyday counter-discourse:** Value grassroots practices that challenge conspiracism and promote constructive dialogue.

1. History and Context of Conspiracy Theories in Estonia and Latvia

In Estonia and Latvia, conspiracy theories took shape under 20th-century authoritarian occupations, where propaganda, cycles of violence and surveillance entrenched lasting suspicion. The Nazi and Soviet regimes embedded conspiratorial framings in the Baltic imagination, with enduring antisemitic narratives at their core. Jews were depicted as disloyal, blamed either for masterminding Bolshevism or for pursuing secret global domination, and turned into scapegoats for political and social upheavals. Nazi propaganda used these claims to legitimise mass violence that led to the near destruction of Jewish communities in both countries. The Soviets later recycled similar motifs: the 'rootless cosmopolitan' trope accused mostly Jewish intellectuals of serving foreign interests, while the fabricated Doctors' Plot alleged that Jewish doctors planned to poison Soviet leaders. Such framings reinforced state prejudice, sustained authoritarian control and redirected discontent away from the regimes themselves.

The Soviet era entrenched suspicion and a habit of interpretive vigilance. The regime's rise was itself seen as a conspiracy, while denunciations and deportations deepened mistrust. The KGB became the ultimate conspiratorial figure, its real surveillance practices magnified into myths of near-total control, with rumours ranging from hidden bugs to informants everywhere and even secret experiments on abducted children. At the same time, propaganda promoted 'system conspiracy narratives' such as the fabricated 'Dulles Plan', which warned of a Western plot to corrupt Soviet society through moral decay. These conditions fostered a constant search for hidden meanings beneath censored discourse, a posture shaped by violence and restricted freedoms that persisted long after independence.

The restoration of independence in 1991 brought democracy, market reforms and integration into Western institutions, but also profound disruption. The sweeping transformations of the 1990s and 2000s – currency reform, mass privatisation, accession to the EU and NATO and the severe austerity measures of 2008 – fuelled anxieties that fed into new conspiracy narratives. Persistent suspicions targeted the so-called 'winner generation' of politicians and businessmen, often accused of past collaboration with the KGB or hidden ties to Moscow. The 1994 sinking of the MS *Estonia*, which killed more than 850 people, became one of the region's most enduring conspiracy theories, with speculation about Kremlin-backed sabotage or concealed political motives resurfacing regularly.

In the early 2000s, the rise of oligarchs in Latvia, notably Aivars Lembergs, fuelled speculation about hidden influence networks; Lembergs himself advanced conspiratorial claims that George Soros was seeking to 'capture' Latvia through NGOs and policymaking. In Estonia, Soviet-era regime critics Jüri Lina and Tiit Madisson published conspiracy-laden books that tied local anxieties to global New World Order frameworks, recycling antisemitic, anti-Masonic and Illuminati tropes. The digital sphere further amplified such ideas: platforms like Vanglaplaneet, launched in 2009, popularised global conspiracy culture, from 9/11 'truth' films to zeitgeist-inspired critiques of elites.

Russian-speaking communities in both Estonia and Latvia developed distinctive conspiratorial milieus, shaped by their marginalisation and by Russian media influence. Narratives that the USSR had been betrayed, that EU and NATO membership were imposed through sham referendums or that Western powers controlled Baltic politics resonated widely. These vernacular discourses intersected with Kremlin propaganda, reinforcing feelings of exclusion and distrust towards local governments.

From the 2010s onwards, conspiracy theories became increasingly tied to populist politics. In Estonia, the Conservative People's Party (EKRE) incorporated conspiracy themes into its rhetoric, invoking cultural Marxism, deep state and the Great Reset plots. In Latvia, the National Alliance (NA) adopted similar positions – particularly those related to cultural Marxism – through subtler dog-whistle politics, while during the pandemic the newly founded Latvia First (LVP) party openly embraced conspiracy theories.

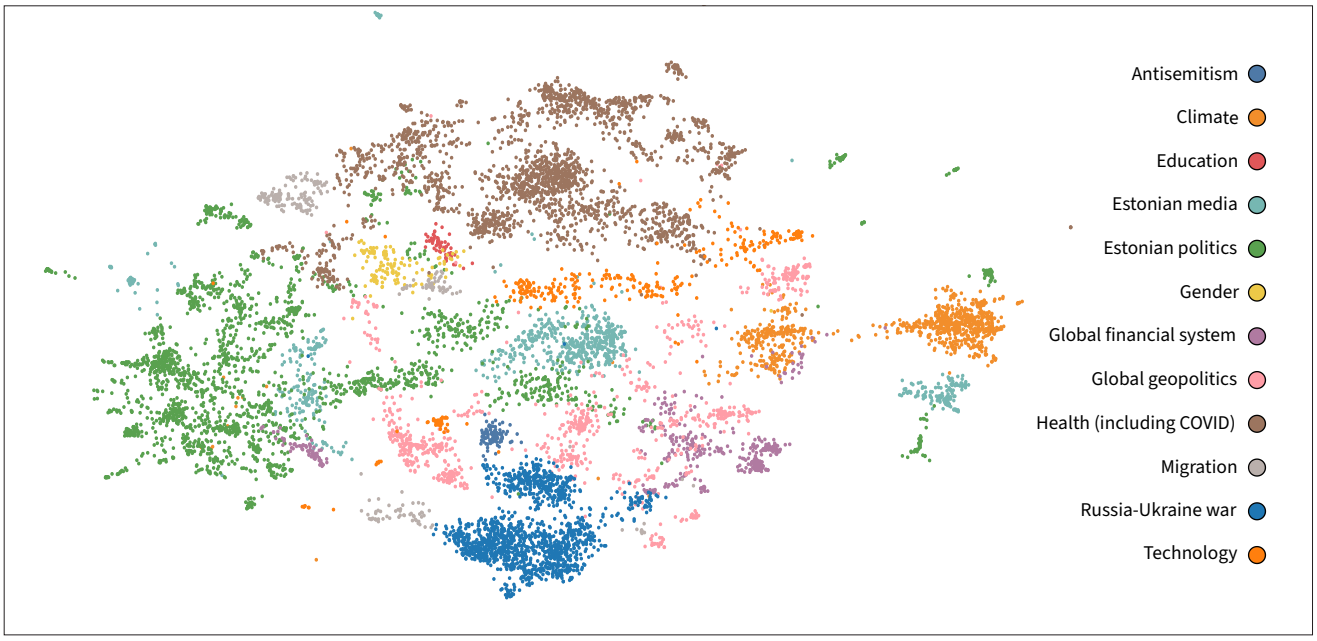

Figure 1. Topic modelling of Estonian-language conspiracy theory discourse, 2019–2024.

The coronavirus pandemic was a watershed moment, as social media brought together alternative medicine advocates, right-wing populists and pro-Kremlin actors in shared conspiracy theory networks. Anti-vaccine and anti-lockdown protests blurred the line between local suspicion and external influence, and the same channels soon promoted war-related narratives, from alleged US-run biolabs in Ukraine to portrayals of Putin as resisting malevolent globalist control. New outlets reinforced these links: in Estonia, Eestieest.com aggregated domestic conspiracist content with Russian sources, while in Latvia, figures such as Alvis Vasiļevskis fused pandemic scepticism with pro-Russian messaging. Across both countries, these platforms reframed issues like memory politics and language reforms as coordinated attacks on Russian identity.

In sum, the Baltic conspiracy culture remains heterogeneous, with locally rooted experiences interacting with global tropes and Kremlin disinformation. Conspiracy theories have become increasingly visible in populist politics and alternative media.

2. Online Environment and Online Conspiracist Environment

Both Latvia and Estonia are characterised by high levels of internet connectivity and extensive engagement with social media. In early 2025, about 1.26 million people in Estonia (93.2% of the population) and 1.75 million in Latvia (93.9%) were online. Social media use was likewise widespread: Estonia counted 989,000 active social media identities (73.1% of the population) and Latvia 1.41 million (75.6%). In Estonia, YouTube was the leading platform, reaching 78% of internet users with an almost even gender split, followed by Facebook (56%), Instagram (38%), TikTok (31%) and X (21%). Latvia showed a similar level of connectivity: YouTube reached 81% of internet users, Facebook 51%, Instagram 40%, TikTok 45% and X 21%.[1]

Media trust is more clearly anchored in Estonia. ERR (Eesti Rahvusringhääling) is the most frequently named trusted source, especially among Estonian speakers, with Postimees and Delfi also seen as reliable. Estonian speakers tend to cite the BBC among international outlets, whereas Russian speakers more often mention Euronews. Latvia presents a flatter trust profile and lower overall confidence: only about 27% of the national majority and 14% of the national minority consider public and commercial media mostly trustworthy. Even so, Latvian public media brands – LSM (Latvijas Sabiedriskais Medijs), LTV (Latvijas Televīzija), LR (Latvijas Radio) – and Delfi rank among the country's most trusted and used outlets.[2]

Across both countries, the Russian-speaking population often describes itself as critical, 'puzzle-assembling' media users who triangulate across ideologically diverse – and often conflicting – sources. Notably in Latvia, the view that both domestic public media and Russian state media engage in propaganda (albeit with opposing narratives) is observable across ethno-linguistic groups. This fosters a perception of media institutions, including public broadcasters, as instruments of political influence and journalists as actors in a broader geopolitical contest.

Latvia ranks 15th in the RSF Press Freedom Index, while Estonia holds 2nd place. This difference is partly explained by media policy decisions concerning Latvia's Russian-speaking population. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, both countries banned Russian state media outlets and affiliated social media accounts, including those offering entertainment content, arguing that even seemingly apolitical materials may contain propagandistic elements. In practice, however, these bans are relatively easy to circumvent, and such content remains accessible to motivated users. In Estonia, the Russian-language television channel ETV+ was established in 2015 under the national broadcaster ERR. By 2021, it had become the country's most-watched Russian-language channel, surpassing pro-Kremlin stations in popularity. A similar initiative planned in Latvia was never implemented due to political resistance, leaving the country more reliant on legal measures to counter disinformation. Latvia's comparatively lower ranking is also influenced by the continued criminalisation of defamation and ongoing concerns over the independence of its media regulatory authority.

In both countries, conspiracy theories exploit identity-related sensitivities and cast doubt on the benefits of European Union and NATO membership, portraying these alliances as sources of conflict and vulnerability. They also attach themselves to recent social tensions – such as the deteriorating security situation and rapid inflation – thereby amplifying public anxiety. LGBTQIA+ rights are another frequent target: the legalisation of same-sex partnerships is often depicted as a threat to tradition and as an ideology imposed from abroad. Within conspiracy narratives, these issues acquire a divisive meaning, framing the promotion of human rights not as a force for cohesion, but as a sign of its erosion.

Due to tighter moderation since COVID-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, many communities – pro-Russian and anti-vaccine alike – have migrated to Telegram. Pro-Russian channels, often run by authors based outside the Baltics or who have recently left, largely remain open; some 'plandemic' channels are public, others private. Within our observation window, several conspiracy-theory groups in Latvia switched to private mode, citing pressure from the government and fact-checkers as the reason.

In Estonia, the online outlets most actively shaping and amplifying conspiracy theories are Uued Uudised and Objektiiv, both linked to right-wing populist political movements, along with their associated social media pages. In Latvia, a similar role is played by the oppositional and controversial portal pietiek.com, which frequently addresses political and social issues from a confrontational and polarising perspective. The main differences between the two countries emerge in platform usage: in Latvia, right-wing populist and extremist movements rely on Twitter/X as their primary tool for mobilisation, whereas in Estonia, the same platform serves mainly as a space for critical discussion and debunking of conspiracy-related claims.

A shared distrust of official government positions – particularly regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine – has created partial overlaps between Estonian- and Russian-language, as well as Latvian- and Russian-language conspiracy communities. This suggests that the transfer of narratives and meanings occurs primarily between national and Russian-language information spheres within the Baltic region. Anti-lockdown activism further intensified social media interactions between pro-Kremlin activists and right-wing populist networks, intertwining narratives and participants of diverse origins.

3. Case Study: Great Replacement Conspiracy Theories in the Region

The Great Replacement is a conspiracy theory that claims native Europeans are being deliberately replaced through immigration, low birth rates and cultural change, driven by globalist elites. While in Western Europe it aligns with immigration tensions, in the Baltic states it resonates more with historical trauma, demographic decline and geopolitical insecurity.

The Baltic reception of the Great Replacement discourse cannot be separated from the memory of Soviet-era Russification, forced deportations and the large-scale settlement of Russian speakers into Estonia and Latvia. These historical experiences are a frequent point of reference, especially when discussing or speculating about the drivers of demographic and cultural change. The extensive emigration following EU accession in 2004 – involving both labour migration and a significant brain drain – compounded a sense of demographic fragility, reinforced by persistently low birth rates. Within this setting, the Great Replacement provides a vocabulary for imagining national decline, even in the absence of large-scale non-European immigration.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, security concerns in the Baltics have reshaped Great Replacement narratives. Estonia and Latvia have received large numbers of Ukrainian refugees, while Latvia has also faced Belarusian-engineered migration as part of Russia's hybrid warfare. In response, both governments have tightened measures to curb Kremlin influence, with Estonia phasing out Russian-language education and revoking local voting rights from Russian and Belarusian citizens and Latvia requiring Russian passport holders to pass Latvian language tests to retain residency. These reforms, though aimed at strengthening sovereignty, have generated discontent among Russian-speaking communities and at times fuelled conspiratorial claims that Baltic elites are themselves orchestrating a replacement of minority groups.

Channels such as Антифашисты Прибалтики depict the Baltic states as 'dying nations' undermined by Western liberalism, while some Russian-speaking politicians cast demographic reforms as 'genocide' or 'deportation'. In Latvia, Alexey Roslikov of Stabilitātei! warns of the Russian-speaking population being replaced by migrant labour; in Estonia, figures like Oleg Ivanov frame language and integration policies as responses to demographic decline.

Estonian-language Great Replacement discourse is most visibly promoted by EKRE through outlets like Uued Uudised and Objektiiv, which portray migration, liberal reforms and EU policies as existential threats. Facebook pages with tens of thousands of followers amplify this rhetoric, while smaller Telegram channels such as Eesti alternatiivmeedia uudised and Fonte.News echo it, often blending in pro-Kremlin rhetoric. Overall, however, explicitly Great Replacement content remains limited and engagement modest.

In Latvian-language discourse, Great Replacement rhetoric spans both fringe and mainstream actors. Ultranationalist groups such as Taisnīgums and newer ethno-nationalist movements promote anti-liberal and anti-immigrant themes, while figures within Latvia First, along with influencers like Aivis Vasilevskis and some representatives of Latvia First (LVP), amplify narratives of Latvia's moral and demographic decline. Telegram remains the most explicit arena, with Twitter/X amplifying nationalist elites and Facebook mixing conspiracist rhetoric with broader political commentary.

Figure 2. Meme from X, 2024: "Latvian Public Media – Latvia's Russifiers, propagandists for gender pathologies, migrant-lovers."

In both countries, the conspiracy theory is framed less around white genocide, as in Western Europe, than around national survival. A central trope is cultural Marxism, which depicts liberal elites as driving a covert project to erode Christianity, family and national traditions, leaving societies open to external control. In this light, reforms on gender, family and minority rights are treated as deliberate cultural subjugation. EKRE's response to Estonia's legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2024 exemplified this logic, while in Latvia opponents of the Istanbul Convention cast it as a gateway to migration and moral collapse. In both contexts, demographic anxieties are fused with fears of liberal elites, NGOs, journalists and fact-checkers portrayed as domestic agents of globalist plots.

Baltic right-wing and populist actors often situate themselves within a wider East–West dichotomy. Western Europe is portrayed as weakened by multiculturalism and mass immigration, while Eastern Europe – particularly Hungary and Poland – serves as a model of resistance. In Latvia, this vision is sometimes articulated through the revival of the Intermarium concept, framed as a conservative bulwark from the Baltics to the Black Sea. In both contexts, the EU is likened to a new Soviet Union, with liberal regulations cast as ideological coercion reminiscent of communist censorship or deportations.

4. Case Study: *1984*

Contemporary conspiracy discourse often gains traction not through new arguments but by reviving texts with deep cultural resonance. Our analysis of Estonian- and Latvian-language Facebook discourse across 2020–2023 (720 posts) found frequent recourse to George Orwell's *1984*, with roughly a third explicitly coupling such references with conspiracy claims. In these texts, Orwell's imagery serves as a cultural repertoire that reframes policy changes and global crises as increments towards total control. Once a development is branded 'Orwellian', disparate grievances – pandemic rules, the green transition, the war in Ukraine and EU/WHO policy – are fused into a single narrative of totalitarian oppression. In the Baltic context, invocations of surveillance, censorship and 'thoughtcrime' tap into lived memories of occupation and repression, lending this framing added credibility and emotional force.

Covid-19 was the ignition point: 'COVID-1984' circulated widely; lockdowns, mask mandates, vaccine registers and passports were cast as a fear campaign designed to habituate citizens to control. In Estonia, the proposed biometric database (ABIS) was portrayed as a decisive Orwellian threshold. In Latvia, the detention of anti-vaccination activists under criminal 'hooliganism' provisions was presented as proof of a tightening dictatorship. Beyond the pandemic, media regulation and counter-disinformation efforts were reframed as censorship. Bans on Kremlin-funded broadcasters and debates over hate-speech protections in Estonia were cited as evidence that government and mainstream media had become a 'Ministry of Truth'. In Latvia, investigative outlet Re:Baltica was singled out as the chief enforcer of orthodoxy; fact-checkers and journalists were routinely depicted as ideological police.

Our analysis shows that references to *1984* were not incidental embellishments but carried distinct rhetorical weight within Baltic conspiracy discourse. Across the material, *1984* tropes fulfilled several functions. They operated as an amplifier, intensifying ordinary criticism into existential alarm ('Freedom is slavery' and 'Ignorance is strength' repurposed to suggest doublespeak around public health or security). They offered a map for interpreting everyday 'micro-impositions' – from remote work to bureaucratic identifiers – as incremental steps towards dehumanisation ('newspeak', people reduced to numbers). They provided a technology lens, recasting contemporary ICT –

biometrics, databases, algorithmic moderation – as the machinery of an emerging surveillance state. And they functioned as a delegitimisation tool, branding counter-disinformation, journalism and expert advice as conspirator censorship. Stylistically, the tropes appeared in three recurring modes. Satirical mimicry borrowed Party slogans to mock politicians and officials. Prophetic readings cast Orwell as having 'foreseen' current events. At the most radical end, *1984* was treated as a literal blueprint being executed by elites, collapsing the line between fiction and plan.

1984 tropes lend themselves perfectly to describing how totalitarian regimes are built and maintained, which explains their ubiquity in super-conspiracy theories worldwide. What makes the Baltic discourse distinctive, however, is the way these references tap into the unresolved memory of Soviet occupation and repression. Allusions to surveillance, censorship and forced conformity echo everyday realities familiar from the Soviet past – blocked media, political policing and restrictions on free expression – so that Orwell's dystopia is read less as metaphor than as historical reminder.

5. Case Study: Mankurt

We examined the Russian-language strand of Baltic conspiracy discourses through a case study of the mankurt. The figure of the mankurt, originating in Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov's novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* (1980), has been transformed into a recurring trope in Kremlin-aligned narratives.

Aitmatov's novel is less widely known than Orwell's *1984*, yet it remains a recognisable text in the post-Soviet space. It is a philosophical exploration of memory, tradition and cultural survival under destructive authoritarian rule. The theme of the past and the importance of historical wisdom is conveyed through a fictionalised folklore created by the author, most strikingly in the legend of the mankurt – a prisoner subjected to brutal torture that erases memory. Few survive this ordeal, but those who do become mindless slaves to their captors.

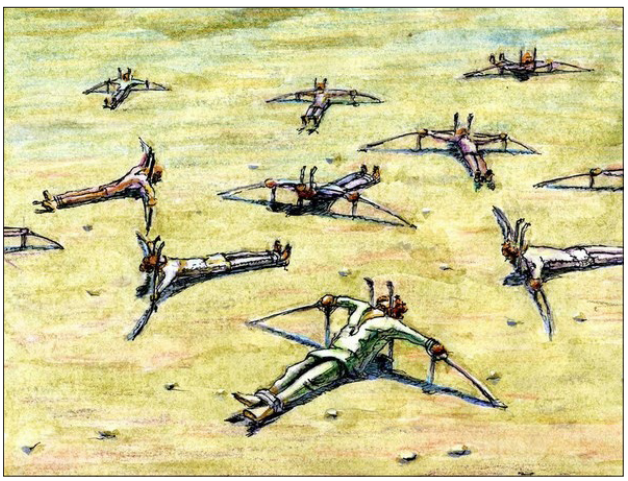

Figure 3. A depiction of torture from Aitmatov's novel. Author unknown.

The story reaches its tragic climax when a mankurt, unable to recognise his own mother, kills her. The mother, who is fighting desperately for her child and striving to restore his lost memory, stands as the second central figure, embodying the depth of pain and loss at the heart of the legend.

In the Baltic context, the mankurt trope is deployed to frame Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania as arenas for the systematic dismantling of Russian cultural memory and identity — a process described as 'mankurtisation'. Within the broader context of Russian anti-Western conspiracy theories, which portray tensions between Russia and NATO as an endless civilisational war, mankurtisation is cast as the creation of an 'army' of subservient people hostile to Russian cultural and historical heritage. The Baltic countries are depicted as Nazi puppets of the so-called collective West, which is accused of seeking to harm Russia by advancing individualism, progressivism and cultural amnesia in opposition to collectivism, historical memory and fidelity to tradition.

Although the trope circulates widely online, our text analysis (2014–2017) assembled a corpus of 100 salient examples to examine how it was used to support mankurtisation conspiracy narratives. We identified two dominant deployments. First, it expressed anxieties about the future: the alleged mankurtisation of children symbolised the loss of Russian language and cultural knowledge among contemporary Russian-speaking youth. Here, the mankurt was imagined as a victim in

need of rescue and protection. Second, the trope was mobilised to describe those who willingly forgot or betrayed Russian culture by rejecting the cult of the 'Great Victory', rewriting history malevolently, and betraying the heroic ancestors of World War II. This framing was applied not only to parts of the local Russian-speaking adult population, but also to ethnic Latvians, Estonians and Lithuanians. In this case, the mankurt was cast less as a victim than as a traitor.

Across both interpretations, mankurtisation is closely associated with so-called progressive values and LGBTQ+ identities. In turn, Russia is imagined as a parental figure (echoing the mother in the original story) longing to reclaim her children and to punish those who refuse to return.

6. The Counter-Disinformation Sector in Estonia and Latvia

> *"Conspiracy theories are dangerous because they can impact elections, and ultimately decide what kind of government we'll have."*
>
> *"I'm used to threats and hate speech. If it doesn't come from close friends or acquaintances, it doesn't bother me."*

Like other regions formerly part of the Soviet Union, the Baltic states are increasingly targeted by Russian Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) activities. Historical experience with propaganda and contemporary geopolitical pressures have significantly shaped the region's counter-disinformation efforts, resulting in a relatively well-developed sector. It brings together international NGOs and research initiatives such as DFRLab, IREX and BECID, as well as NATO-accredited Centres of Excellence and a range of national initiatives.

In Estonia, the issue of Kremlin-driven foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) came to the forefront during the so-called Bronze Night events of 2007, when the relocation of a Soviet war monument in Tallinn triggered sharp tensions between Estonian- and Russian-speaking communities, further amplified by Russian information operations. In the following years, the government developed a strategic communication framework and launched several corresponding initiatives, such as the State Chancellery's Strategic Communication Unit, the 2019 *Guide to Dealing with Information Attacks* and the 2021 update of the *Government Communication Handbook*, which emphasises cooperation with trusted journalists. Since 2014, Propastop – a volunteer initiative within the Estonian Defence League – has monitored and analysed Russian disinformation, supported by its Propamon monitoring tool.

In Latvia, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence was established in Riga in 2014. The National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP) has developed a media literacy database with educational resources and public campaigns. In 2022, the State Chancellery issued the *Handbook Against Disinformation*, focused on countering Russian propaganda, followed in 2023 by *Black on White*, a long-term educational multimedia project.

In Estonia and Latvia, fact-checking and investigative journalism are carried out by DELFI and the Baltic Center for Investigative Journalism Re:Baltica, along with its fact-checking branch Re:Check (LV). Both are accredited by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). DELFI and Re:Baltica combine fact-checking with investigative journalism practices: DELFI regularly publishes fact-checks in Estonia and participates in media literacy and disinformation-related training activities, while Re:Baltica in Latvia produces fact-checks and explanatory analyses that promote transparency and credibility within the media landscape.

Although Latvia and Estonia face similar challenges, their approaches to countering disinformation and regulating the media differ. In Latvia, efforts to address disinformation and regulate the media space rely primarily on legal mechanisms that allow for a clearer distinction between trustworthy outlets and those disseminating manipulative content. At the same time, this has sparked debate over potential restrictions on freedom of speech and media independence. Estonia, by contrast, has adopted a more liberal approach, focusing primarily on fostering citizens' media literacy and critical thinking skills.

Alongside mapping the counter-disinformation sector, REDACT conducted interviews with key organisations to explore how disinformation in general and conspiracy theories in particular are understood and tackled, as well as the challenges faced by professionals in the field.

The interviews revealed that in the region conspiracy theories are generally treated as a subset of disinformation, though respondents acknowledged their distinctive nature – particularly the difficulty of addressing them with standard fact-checking methods. Several emphasised that conspiracy theories are most harmful when they form overarching interpretative frameworks or are weaponised by populist parties and embedded in strategic communication.

Despite growing recognition of disinformation from other global actors, efforts largely prioritise Russian strategic narratives. Notably, despite the nuanced view of conspiracy theories, some respondents did not explicitly recognise their specific role in this context. When conspiracy theories were mentioned, respondents tended to cite episodic claims (e.g., 'biolabs in Ukraine'), whereas more elaborate storylines – such as portraying the Baltic states as 'covert Nazi regimes' – were sometimes dismissed as 'mere disinformation', overlooking the role of conspiratorial worldviews.

Both governmental and non-governmental professionals underlined their independence from political parties, presenting their work as a service to democracy and state security. For NGOs, however, independence is closely tied to funding challenges. As one interviewee remarked: "We need to stay as independent as possible – because people could say, 'Oh, you're just pushing the government's agenda since you take their money.'"

Key difficulties also include burnout and online harassment targeting specialists, often from right-wing groups, conspiracy theorists and pro-Kremlin actors. Counter-disinformation professionals are not only criticised as 'internet censors' or accused of distorting facts in favour of governments, but also face lawsuits and direct threats. The mental health risks associated with such pressures should not be overlooked.

7. Expanded Key Findings

Conspiracy Theories

- **In Estonia and Latvia, conspiracy theories grow from occupation and trauma:** Nazi and Soviet propaganda, surveillance and repression bred lasting suspicion and antisemitic scapegoating that still shape Baltic conspiracy discourse.
- **Post-1991 transformations continue to shape Baltic conspiracy theories:** Rapid reforms, privatisation and abrupt EU/NATO accession requirements left lasting disruptions, while the MS *Estonia* disaster and economic austerity fuel speculation about hidden elites and foreign control.
- **Pandemic and war consolidated conspiracy theory ecosystems in the Baltics:** Covid-19 brought together alternative medicine advocates, right-wing populists and pro-Kremlin actors into shared networks that now circulate war-related narratives, from alleged US biolabs in Ukraine to portrayals of Putin as resisting globalist control and Ukraine as morally corrupted by the West.

- **Covid-era moderation shifted Baltic conspiracy discourse to new platforms:** Stricter content rules during the pandemic pushed communities on mainstream platforms towards coded language and redirected explicit conspiracy content to Telegram. While Telegram reaches smaller audiences, Facebook remains central in both Estonia and Latvia.

- **Russian-speaking minorities sustain distinct yet locally interconnected conspiracy discourses, shaped by Kremlin-linked media and narratives of marginalisation:** They overlap significantly with Baltic right-wing narratives in portraying a liberal-globalist elite imposing a totalitarian order, especially through alleged gender ideologies and moral decay.

- **Great Replacement theories in the Baltics are marginal but locally inflected:** They appear mainly through anxieties over demographic decline, emigration and cultural erosion. Unlike in Western Europe, where the focus is on Muslim immigration, Baltic discourses link the threat to national survival with tropes of liberal 'cultural Marxism' and externally imposed values.

- **Cross-issue conspiracism:** In the Baltic region, pandemic-era grassroots online movements expanded into climate and security scepticism, warning of 'climate lockdowns' and a totalitarian society built under cover of the war in Ukraine and the AI revolution. This cross-issue dynamic is enabled by superconspiracy frameworks that depict conspirators as infiltrating the very heart of world politics.

- **Literary dystopias furnish a potent repertoire for framing totalitarian threats in Baltic conspiracy discourse:** Orwellian tropes like COVID-1984, thoughtcrime and Big Brother fuse grievances into existential narratives that echo Soviet repression. Such imagery heightens emotion, legitimises distrust and, through its multivalence, lets actors spread discriminatory or violent messages with plausible deniability.

- **The mankurt trope in Russian-language conspiracy discourse powerfully depicts the Baltics as sites of cultural violence:** Kremlin-aligned narratives portray the region as undergoing 'mankurtisation' – the erasure of Russian memory and identity. By framing integration and security policies as cultural genocide and liberal values as corrosive, the metaphor casts Russia as saviour while evoking dehumanisation and betrayal. Circulating through Russian-language media, it functions within Kremlin-directed FIMI, voicing antagonistic claims through a figurative register.

- **Blind spots in representations of conspiracism:** Critical accounts – whether voiced by opinion leaders or active citizens – often highlight the most eccentric examples and emphasise the immediate dangers of online conspiracy theories. Such alarmist framing obscures the social and experiential functions of conspiracy theory engagement and risks overstating the degree of control exercised by strategic misinformers.

Counter-Disinformation Sector

- **Diverse and active sector:** Shaped by histories of occupation, propaganda and current geopolitics, Latvia and Estonia have built a dynamic counter-disinformation sector that combines international NGOs, NATO Centres of Excellence and national initiatives to confront Russian FIMI activities.

- **Latvia's response:** Hosts NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (Riga, 2014); NEPLP runs a media-literacy hub and campaigns; the State Chancellery issued the *Handbook Against Disinformation* (2022) and *Black on White* (2023), a long-term project helping citizens spot and report disinformation.

- **Estonia's response:** Hosts a State Chancellery Strategic Communication Unit; guidance includes the G*uide to Dealing with Information Attacks* (2019) and updated *Government Communication Handbook* (2021); Propastop (Estonian Defence League, since 2014) tracks Russian disinformation via Propamon.
- **Non-governmental actors:** DELFI (LV/EE) and Re:Baltica/Re:Check (LV) are IFCN-accredited; DELFI also runs workshops in Estonia, while Re:Baltica pairs its investigations with social-media debunks in Latvia.
- **Different national models:** Latvia relies on a stronger legal framework that defines professional journalistic standards, allowing clearer distinctions between credible and manipulative outlets but raising press freedom concerns, while Estonia adopts a lighter, education-focused regulatory model.
- **Limits of fact-checking:** Baltic practitioners note that conspiracy theories function as self-sealing worldviews, recasting debunking as further 'proof'. Addressing them as overarching frameworks – rather than isolated falsehoods – remains a pressing challenge, particularly when weaponised by populist political forces.
- **Conspiracy theories in Russian FIMI:** Often reduced to isolated claims rather than broader narrative frameworks; elaborate storylines (e.g., portraying the Baltic states as 'Nazi regimes') are sometimes dismissed as mere disinformation, overlooking their roots in conspiratorial worldviews.
- **Workforce risks:** Actors in the sector face burnout, harassment, lawsuits and direct threats – posing genuine mental-health risks. For NGOs, fragile funding remains a critical concern.

8. Expanded Recommendations

1. **Develop context-specific responses:** Don't import counter-conspiracism models wholesale. Approaches must be tailored to the Baltic histories of occupation, the particularities of small-language media spheres, the presence of sizable Russian-speaking minorities and persistent geopolitical threats.
2. **Address structural causes of conspiracism:** Conspiracy theories often resonate with lived experiences of disruption, perceived corruption or marginalisation. Tackling these root conditions is more effective than treating them as isolated delusions.
3. **Recognise the distinct nature of conspiracy theories:** They are not merely false claims but interpretive anchors that affirm identities and worldviews, resisting refutation and absorbing counter-arguments. Strategies must account for this and directly address the existential and social tensions that contesting conspiracy theories can generate for target groups.
4. **Build competences for emotional and cultural analysis:** Analyses of conspiratorial discourses reveal that information manipulation (both foreign and domestic) exploits tropes of high symbolic value – from *1984* to mankurtisation – that activate multiple layers of cultural memory. Such powerful and ambivalent modes of representation, which often blur the line between truth and falsehood, deserve sharpened analytical attention.
5. **Strengthen cultural resilience against Kremlin-directed FIMI:** Invest in empowering cultural resources and narratives attuned to local affective experience, enhancing resilience and reducing susceptibility to conspiratorial discourses.
6. **Avoid normalising conspiratorial rhetoric in politics:** Populist actors across the Baltics increasingly weaponise conspiracy discourse and tropes. Mainstream parties and media should resist adopting these framings into political debate.

7. **Provide stable and independent funding for counter-disinformation work:** This field remains fragile under short-term and precarious funding. Sustained and flexible support is essential to safeguard independence, prevent politicisation and enable long-term planning.

8. **Enhance civic and media literacy beyond fact-checking:** Resilience requires collective approaches that cultivate critical and contextual understanding of disinformation and conspiracism, rather than placing responsibility solely on individual professionals.

9. **Protect counter-disinformation professionals:** Introduce protective measures and ensure access to mental health support, strengthen legal safeguards and publicly recognise their civic role to counter harassment, pressure and burnout.

10. **Value and strengthen everyday counter-discourse:** Grassroots practices that creatively challenge conspiracy narratives should be recognised and supported, while outreach and engaging educational tools are needed to curb polarisation and uncivil tactics (e.g. personal attacks, defamation, harassment) and to foster more constructive public dialogue.

References

[1] See more detailed statistics for Latvia at https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-latvia and for Estonia at https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-estonia.

[2] Questions of trust in professional media are discussed in more detail in the Estonian context at https://www.kul.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2024-03/EIM%202023%20LISA%201_kvalitatiivuuringu%20aruanne_0.pdf, and in the Latvian context at https://www.neplp.lv/lv/media/8775/download?attachment.

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