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# In the Kremlin's crosshairs: Lithuania and trust in NATO



Narratives travelling the information space

**Most Lithuanians remain rather resilient to pro-Russian narratives and few consume news from Russian media outlets. Moscow, however, has actively sought to use the past and interpretations therein to further its political agenda in the country. Russia, for example, has aimed to co-opt sympathetic media channels to amplify Kremlin storylines and sow distrust in NATO. The Russian Federation, in fact, owns several television networks and news sites that are available to or targeted at Lithuanian audiences.<sup>1</sup>**

Attitudes towards the Kremlin are generally unfavourable among Lithuanians according to GLOBSEC Trends 2021 data, with only 13% of the population viewing Vladimir

Putin positively compared to the Central and Eastern European average of 35%.<sup>2</sup> Lithuanians, concurrently, are among the staunchest supporters of NATO in the region, with 84% of respondents saying that Lithuania should remain a member of the Alliance (ten per cent above the regional average).

Research conducted in 2016<sup>3</sup>, 2018<sup>4</sup> and 2020<sup>5</sup> by the Eastern Europe Studies Centre found that those who agree that life was better in Soviet times are more inclined to view Russia as a friend, favour Vladimir Putin, believe Russian media to be impartial and support narratives that shine a good light on Moscow.<sup>6</sup> As the aforementioned EESC research underlined, the 2008–2012 economic crisis saw an increase in Soviet nostalgia. It appears that Lithuania was particularly affected by propaganda during this time, lending credence to the belief that financial problems or other crises fuel these types of narratives. As such, it is important to continue monitoring the public domain in

Lithuania and public moods during crisis periods to ensure people not fall into the traps set up by foreign malign powers.

The Kremlin has been disseminating disinformation about NATO in EU countries to achieve two primary goals: 1) furthering its foreign policy ambitions by portraying itself as engaging in self-defence in conflict situations both militarily and diplomatically; 2) rousing distrust towards NATO and regional defence institutions among the bloc's own members.

This case study aims to underscore two concrete mechanisms through which distrust towards NATO is being constructed. The first concerns the role of high-ranking Russian politicians in narrativizing about the bad faith actions of NATO. The second, meanwhile, turns to the impact of a Russian media outlet that focuses its coverage on the Baltic States. The publication, notably, has sought to stir up opposition to the arms sales of NATO allies that go to the Lithuanian Armed Forces and government.

## The myth of NATO heading east

“We said not an inch to the east — that was a NATO guarantee in 1990. So, what became of that? They fooled us. We’ve seen five waves of NATO expansion. Now, they’re in Romania and Poland,” Russian President Vladimir Putin pronounced in his annual press conference in December 2021. The statement implied that, by accepting former Soviet republics, the Alliance of Western powers had reneged on a promise made to former USSR President Mikhail Gorbachev.<sup>7</sup> This storyline is particularly pertinent concerning ongoing developments in Ukraine.

There is, in fact, only scant evidence to the claim that NATO promised not to expand eastward following the end of the Cold War. The assertion rather is flawed and merely based on informal conversations that are now publicly available. In a conversation with Soviet leader Mikhail

Gorbachev, US Secretary of State James Baker, for example, mentioned that he believed it unlikely that NATO would extend itself beyond Germany’s eastern border.<sup>8</sup> But there is no firm evidence that the assurances went anywhere beyond those conversations.

At the same time, declassified White House transcripts also reveal that, in 1997, Bill Clinton repeatedly rejected President Boris Yeltsin’s offer of a ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ that no former Soviet republics join NATO: “I can’t make commitments on behalf of NATO, and I’m not going to be in the position myself of vetoing NATO expansion with respect to any country, much less letting you or anyone else do so... NATO operates by consensus.”<sup>9</sup>

“Whatever promises about non-enlargement may have been discussed...

in 1990, the hard fact is Russia accepted enlargement, with detailed conditions, and in writing, when the NATO-Russia Founding Act was agreed,” Wolfgang Ischinger, a former German ambassador and deputy foreign minister who is now head of the Munich Security Conference, told Radio Free Europe.<sup>10</sup>

As EU vs. Disinfo writes: “NATO allies take decisions by consensus, and these are recorded. There is no record of any decision taken by NATO about putting a halt to enlargement to the East. Personal assurances from individual leaders cannot replace Alliance consensus and do not constitute formal NATO agreements. Moreover, at the time of the alleged promise, the Warsaw Pact still existed, which by definition precluded any member of the Pact from joining NATO. Its members did not agree on its dissolution until 1991.”<sup>11</sup>

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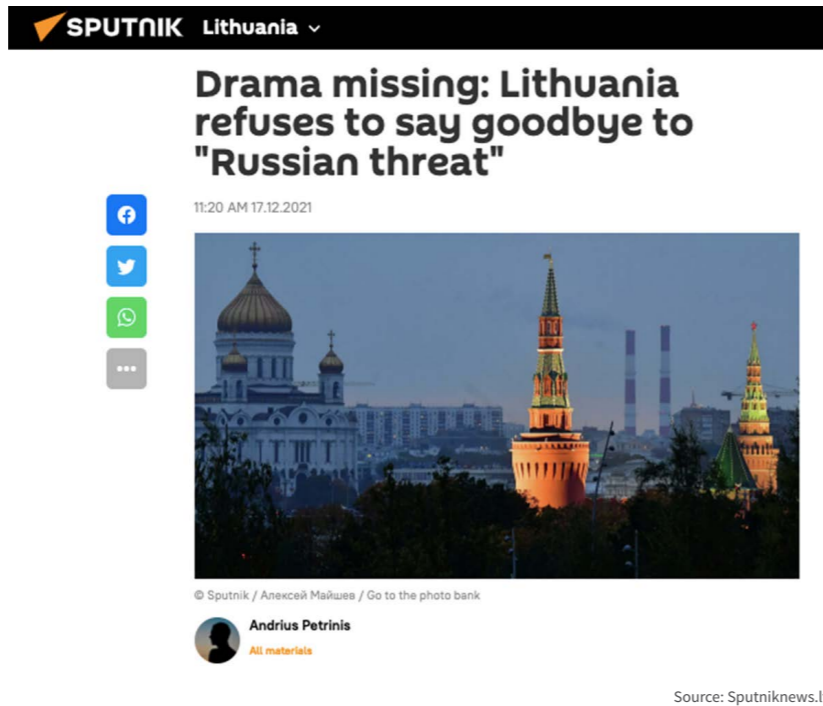
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3 [http://www.eesc.lt/uploads/news/id987/RESC%20monografija\\_propaganda.pdf](http://www.eesc.lt/uploads/news/id987/RESC%20monografija_propaganda.pdf)  
4 Linas Kojala, Andrius Prochorenko, „Dezinformacijos poveikis Lietuvos visuomenei“, Rytų Europos studijų centras, 2018  
5 <https://www.eesc.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/RESC-tyrimas.pdf>  
6 The latest research: [https://www.eesc.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/v02-web\\_Research-of-Perception-of-Threats\\_paper\\_A4.pdf](https://www.eesc.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/v02-web_Research-of-Perception-of-Threats_paper_A4.pdf)  
7 <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-demand-western-security-guarantees-end-threat-ukraine-invasion/>  
8 <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1577192/lrt-facts-has-nato-ever-promised-russia-not-to-expand-east>  
9 <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569>  
10 <https://www.rferl.org/a/nato-expansion-russia-mislead/31263602.html>  
11 <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/pending-check-gorbachev-was-promised-that-nato-would-not-go-east/>

The narrative was also recently refuted by former (2000–2004) Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov. “Putin said that NATO had promised not to move east, but “cheated”. The West did not give such promises to either M. Gorbachev or B. Yeltsin. I know this from my personal conversations with them,” he wrote on Twitter.<sup>12</sup> Mr Gorbachev, likewise, has also denied that such promises were made on numerous occasions.<sup>13</sup>

It is noteworthy that Lithuanian National Radio and the television news outlet LRT.lt, together with experts, not only debunked the myth but also provided foreign audiences with a translated article about the matter.<sup>14</sup> “When Russia says that it has taken over the Soviet Union’s commitments, there was nothing to take over in terms of NATO enlargement because there were no contractual things. The takeover of verbal promises has no basis in diplomacy,” Vilnius University professor and the head of research programmes at the EESC Tomas Janeliūnas said to journalists.

Yet, this narrative is designed to convey the impression that NATO is de facto aggressive vis a vis Moscow by absorbing the Baltic States into the Alliance and sending NATO troops to and expanding its military facilities in allied countries. The assertion is often used as a pretext to deploy even more military units in the vicinity of the border with NATO. Russia employed the purported NATO threat, for example, in 2018 to justify the deployment of the Iskander-M mobile ballistic missile system (NATO classification SS-26 Stone) in Kaliningrad, with a strike range of 500 kilometres. This defence was voiced by Duma Defence Committee Chairman Vladimir Shamanov.<sup>15</sup>

The tropes of NATO “promises” and “aggressiveness” are currently being peddled to undermine growing links between the Alliance and Ukraine. “We have made clear that any further NATO movement to the east is unacceptable,” Putin said. His comments reflect recent Russian demands that the U.S. pull its troops out of European countries that joined the Alliance from the late 1990s onwards and block any former Soviet



The screenshot shows a news article on the Sputnik Lithuania website. The title is "Drama missing: Lithuania refuses to say goodbye to 'Russian threat'". The author is Andrius Petrinis. The article features a photograph of a cityscape at night with illuminated buildings and a church spire. The date is 11:20 AM 17.12.2021. The source is cited as Sputniknews.lt.

republics like Ukraine from joining. Washington has rejected the demands but negotiations with Moscow will, nonetheless, proceed through a few different formats. The use of this and similar narratives are regularly deployed, including in Lithuania, in an attempt to out-manoeuvre the US in response to current events.

The situation has spurred concern in Eastern Europe that Western countries may prove willing to discuss security matters with Russia and even provide certain security guarantees to Moscow. Russia, for its part, explained that it is concerned about NATO actions near its border. The Lithuanian version of Sputnik indeed asserted that, if the Alliance reassures Russia about its security, the situation in the region would stabilise and the so-called “Russian threat” vanish.<sup>16</sup>

Another Sputnik article, quoting the National Interest, questioned the ironclad guarantee of Baltic defence and wondered whether the US would be willing to trade the security of the region for peace with Russia.<sup>17</sup>

These stories constitute an attempt to incite panic and uncertainty regarding the extent to which the Baltic membership in the alliance is respected and the length that NATO would go to defend the countries. The leaders of the largest NATO member states including the US, Germany and France, in fact, have expressed an ardent commitment towards defending the organization’s members. Other Sputnik articles on the subject, meanwhile, were oriented towards promoting Russia’s general position rather than directly targeting Lithuania or the Baltic States. One Sputnik article, for example, claimed that NATO’s Balkan expansion (a region traditionally closer to Russia) was enabled only by its devastation of Yugoslavia. The authors further alleged that talk of troops amassing on Ukraine’s borders is disinformation and a propaganda campaign, carried out by Europeans who have forgotten their history, intended to humiliate Russia.<sup>18</sup> This narrative should be continuously tracked to identify shifts as NATO–Russia relations evolve.

## Mixing facts regarding defence expenditure

A second Kremlin disinformation narrative pertains to Lithuania’s membership in NATO and especially Lithuanian military procurements. It claims that the resources that Vilnius allocates to military equipment could be better used on social welfare rather than military hardware.

An April 2021 article from Baltnews – a Russian disinformation site focused on the Baltic States – scoffed that Lithuania is purchasing outdated weapons instead of vaccines.<sup>19</sup> The opinion also held that the vaccination campaigns in Lithuania (and the EU more broadly) were sluggish and ineffective. The outlet further alleged that the decision to procure weapons and “old armoured vehicles” seemed to be a particularly irresponsible decision by Lithuanian authorities. The accusations, absurdly, were spurred by the Ministry of Defence’s announcement that it would purchase German pistols.

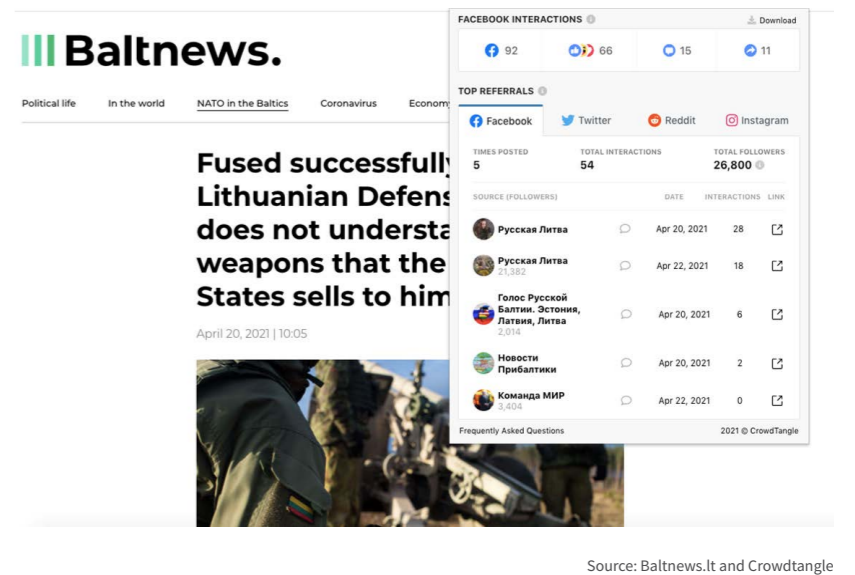
Contrary to the claims in the Baltnews article, the decision to buy new pistols for Lithuanian troops was taken for good reason - the acquisition is aimed at phasing out the use of varied calibre pistols in the Lithuanian Armed Forces and switching to a single 9x19 mm pistol cartridge, leaving the still usable weapons in reserve and replacing those already at the end of their service life.

In scrutinizing the lump sums, the juxtaposition of pistols and jabs is rather inexplicable. Lithuania will expend up to €125 million for vaccines<sup>20</sup> compared to €1.5 million for pistols.<sup>21</sup> And the purchase of vaccines has nothing to do with the financing of Lithuania’s national defence – they are two different budget lines. Unlike the purchase of arms, which Lithuania procures on its own, the procurement of COVID-19 vaccines in the EU is centralised and implemented by the European Commission.

This is just one example, among many, that underscore how Baltnews seeks to deride all Lithuanian military purchases by mixing unrelated cases in a cynical attempt to score points. On 12 April, 2021, the Ministry



The screenshot shows a news article on the Baltnews website. The title is "Pistols instead of vaccines. Lithuania sets priorities in a peculiar way". The article features a photograph of soldiers in military uniforms wearing blue face masks. The date is April 10, 2021 | 10:05. The source is cited as Baltnews.lt.



The screenshot shows a news article on the Baltnews website. The title is "Fused successfully Lithuanian Defence weapons that the States sells to him". The article features a photograph of soldiers in military uniforms. The date is April 20, 2021 | 10:05. The source is cited as Baltnews.lt and Crowdtangle.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1577192/lrt-facts-has-nato-ever-promised-russia-not-to-expand-east>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.vesti.ru/article/1489898>

<sup>16</sup> <https://sputniknews.lt/20211217/truksta-dramos-lietuva-atsisako-atsisveikinti-su-rusijos-gresme-20528515.html>

<sup>17</sup> <https://sputniknews.lt/20220107/niekada-nesakyk-niekada-ar-amerika-gali-ismainyti-lietuva-20852476.html>

<sup>18</sup> <https://sputniknews.lt/20220110/nato-petys-i-peti-stoja-prie-rusijos-geopolitin-ekspansij-20880537.html>

<sup>19</sup> <https://baltnews.lt/nato/20210410/1020707594/Pistolety-vmesto-vaktsin-Litva-svoeobrazno-rasstavlyayet-prioritety.html>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.vz.lt/verslo-aplinka/2020/11/12/pagal-ek-sutarti-su-biotech-ir-pfizer-lietuvai-tektu-124-mln-vakcinu-doziuoBtgg>

<sup>21</sup> <https://kauno.diena.lt/naujienos/lietuva/salies-pulsas/lietuvos-kariams-uz-15-mln-euru-pirks-pistoletus-pasirinko-vokiskus-984842>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1387456/jav-lietuva-perdave-priestankiniu-granatavaidziu-uz-10-mln-euru>

<sup>23</sup> <https://baltnews.lt/nato/20210420/1020744265/Minoborony-Lity-ne-razbiraetsya-v-oruzhii-kotoroe-emu-prodaet-SSHA.html>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/kam-pasirasys-tutartis-su-svedija-del-amunicijos-lietuvos-kariuomenei-pirkimo-56-1611078>

<sup>25</sup> [https://baltnews.lt/ekonomika\\_online\\_novosti/20220112/1021305928/Sotsialka-podozdhet-Na-cto-Litva-reshila-potratis-dengi.html](https://baltnews.lt/ekonomika_online_novosti/20220112/1021305928/Sotsialka-podozdhet-Na-cto-Litva-reshila-potratis-dengi.html)

stating that military acquisitions were going forward despite the difficult social-economic climate facing certain segments of society. This case represents yet another example witnessing Russian media attempting to link military expenditure to social welfare spending in the country.

And even when no new acquisitions can be targeted, old ones are dredged up and rehashed. A Baltnews article from November 2021<sup>26</sup>, for example, purports that Lithuania is weakened through military aviation weapons purchases from the West rather than Russia. The author, notably, points to an agreement that Lithuania signed with the United States in 2020 for the procurement of four Black Hawk military helicopters as evidence. Lithuania will pay the US €181 million over five years for the helicopter platform, with the US government providing around €26 million in support. “At the same time, this tactic allows the Pentagon leadership to get rid of outdated equipment” – the author presses this biased opinion despite acknowledging that there is a real need to update the outdated helicopter fleet in Lithuania.

Another Baltnews article refers to Lithuania as a “warehouse of unnecessary weapons”, stating that it only buys obsolete German armaments that no longer meet the needs of Western countries.<sup>27</sup> The author of the text and the expert he interviewed, however, neglected mention of the fact that the largest purchase the Lithuanian Armed Forces has made to date pertained to brand-new Boxer infantry fighting vehicles from Germany. These additions are being deployed to reinforce the military forces of Germany, the Netherlands, Australia and the United Kingdom. The purchase of NASAMS air defence systems and new Joint Light Tactical Vehicles from the US also undermine the author’s arguments.

These examples represent only a handful of the many articles published by Russian-controlled media outlets in the Baltics that collectively, by weaving together a web of twisted and false stories, aim to sow distrust towards NATO allies that market arms to the Lithuanian Armed Forces and government. The articles are not particularly sophisticated and their insinuations can easily be refuted. While

this dynamic could lead some to question the value of heeding and/or responding to the falsehoods, it is important to recognize that the simplicity of a lie can make it persuasive to people already disinclined towards doublechecking facts. Lithuanians, as recent research underlines, are the least likely in Europe to assess the information they receive (the results were, in fact, disappointing for Europe as a whole).<sup>28</sup> The findings are especially worrying against a backdrop where malign information operations have annually increased by 10%, according to the Strategic Communication Department of the Lithuanian Army.<sup>29</sup>

These outcomes come despite the fact that information and fact checking tools are already available in English and other EU languages. Further attention, consequently, must be paid to these tools to, among other changes, make them more user friendly and accessible. It is necessary, furthermore, to ensure they are more actively promoted – the present reach of counter-disinformation efforts could still be viewed as insufficient. And the management of the information sphere more generally needs to be re-examined, with attention directed to potential new approaches given the ever-evolving nature of the challenge we are confronting.

<sup>26</sup> <https://baltnews.lt/nato/20211117/1021175598/Litovskaya-armiya-Komu-vygodna-imitatsiya-voennoy-moschi.html>

<sup>27</sup> <https://baltnews.lt/nato/20211001/1021097601/Sklad-nenuzhnogo-oruzhiya-Kak-Litvu-prevrachayut-v-voennuyu-pomoyku.html>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.delfi.lt/en/lifestyle/experts-concerned-with-eus-lowest-percentage-of-lithuanians-verifying-online-info.d?id=89049765>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.delfi.lt/en/politics/flow-of-disinformation-up-18-pct-last-year.d?id=86812269>

