LESSONS LEARNED:

Key findings from social media monitoring prior to the Latvian parliamentary elections in October, 2018

re:baltica

THE BALTIC CENTER FOR INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

November, 2018

Lessons learned: key findings from social media monitoring prior to the Latvian parliamentary elections in October, 2018

Policy paper

Using social media to influence another country's elections has become a question of national security in many countries of Western Europe and in the United States of America. In Latvia, where propaganda from neighbouring Russia has been a fact of life since the restoration of independence in 1990, potential meddling by the Kremlin in the parliamentary elections in October, 2018 was a major concern.

After monitoring social media for two months prior to the elections, The Baltic Center for Investigative Journalism *Re:Baltica* has come to the conclusion that there are several blind spots regarding the regulation of content and political expenditure on social media.

Nevertheless, *Re:Baltica* did not find persuasive evidence of foreign interference in Latvia's parliamentary elections.

Key findings

- **These elections differed from the previous ones as Latvian politicians have come to understand the power of social media.** In 2017, during the municipal elections, the country's anti-corruption watchdog, which is also in charge of regulating party financing (KNAB), did not even monitor social networks as a separate campaign platform. A year later, during the parliamentary elections, the parties declared that they planned to spend EUR 208 614 on ads on social media alone, mostly on *Facebook (FB)*, which amounts to 1/10 of the overall campaign spending.

- **In total, we collected and analysed 2100 political ads;** monitored 598 *FB* pages and 44 *FB* groups on a daily basis; published 27 news pieces (plus 9 in Russian and 2 in English) and 5 explanatory videos. Latvian media re-published or quoted our stories 76 times; international media – 7 times. Members of our team were interviewed as experts on disinformation and misinformation 34 times.

- *Re:Baltica* **didn't identify any paid FB posts with controversial content** produced by anonymous accounts or fake profiles. All paid posts with political messages were clearly affiliated with political parties, their members or candidates. KNAB officials confirmed to *Re:Baltica* that they have come to the same conclusion.

1

- Nevertheless, *Re:Baltica* identified a **number of anonymous *FB* pages,** some of which were created shortly before the elections, which were actively promoting either highly positive or negative content about specific political parties or their candidates. For example, the *FB* page *101.km* was created in early spring, 2018. It had only 1500 followers, but the memes they published reached up to 5000 interactions each and were the most popular ones of the pre-election period. The page smeared all the political parties except for the populist party *KPV LV* and the main pro-Russian party *Harmony*. It is not known who created the page and who is financing it because *Facebook* does not publish that information.

- A similar **problem was observed with *FB* pages which have long existed but, prior to the election campaign, promoted entertainment content or acted as a marketplace.** They have huge numbers of followers and could be very influential in spreading a certain political message. For example, a few days before the elections, *Kur paēst?* (Where to eat?), which has 44 000 members, changed its cover photo to show 2 candidates running for *Harmony*. Although posts published by these pages are not paid for, it's hard to verify whether the administrators of these pages receive any payment directly. *FB* only shares information with law-enforcement institutions in cases criminal proceedings have begun.

- To avoid ambiguity and ensure that spending on social networks can be controlled and monitored to the extent required by Latvian law, *Re:Baltica* believes that **information about the creators/holders of all *FB* pages should be publicly disclosed.** Each page should state who its creators and administrators (who upload content) are and provide their contact information.

- Following accusations of spreading misleading information, in the summer of 2018 *FB* launched a new feature "Info and ads" which shows ads paid for by the particular *FB* page. Nevertheless, the tool is not very helpful as it only shows the ad while it's being promoted. As soon as the promotion period ends, the ad disappears from the "Info and Ads" section. For transparency and accountability, it would be **more useful if paid ads were collected in the "Info and Ads" section for at least a year or two.**

- During the pre-election period, Jēkabs Straume, the director of KNAB, expressed his main concern: **what will the bureau do if they identify a sudden stream of suspicious content on *FB*** or if a political party exceeds the campaign expenditure limits? After long email threads, KNAB eventually obtained the necessary information from *FB* and *Google* regarding political party expenditure, but not regarding anonymous *FB* pages.

- In early spring 2018, a special **strategic communication group under the State Chancellery was introduced,** consisting of the major law enforcement institutions, the Central Election Commission, etc**.** The group's coordinators were communicating

with the social media giants on a regular basis and told *Re:Baltica* that this was productive.

● If KNAB noticed something suspicious, it would have to rely on the people leading the strategic communication group and their contacts at *FB* and Google. This practice involves certain risks. It would be more reasonable **to create a specific, and importantly, fast procedure whereby an institution involved in controlling campaign finances could reach out to social media representatives and make them act immediately in potentially threatening situations.**

● Although state officials claimed that their cooperation with *FB* and Google was productive, *Re:Baltica* cannot claim the same. It took numerous attempts for us to get a response from social media. A *FB* press officer responded quickly, but it took time to receive answers on substance. At one point, the press officer sincerely apologized for delays, saying that there are only two press officers covering 20 countries! ***Google* representatives never responded to our emails describing websites spreading misinformation such as "Two migrants from Syria kill a woman on Riga streets with two stab wounds". These web pages displayed *Google* ads.**

● As a result, to bring *Google*'s attention to web pages spreading hate speech and misinformation and creating panic in society, *Re:Baltica* started to CC all such emails to a coordinator from the strategic communication team under the State Chancellery. **It is unacceptable that the media should have to rely on a state institution in order to get a response from an international social media company.**

● **A regulation at national level should be introduced requiring social media to take down harmful content within a certain period of time.** Social media have been reluctant to take real action to improve the situation on their platforms and have only acted after huge pressure, such as from Congress inquiries in the US and legislation change in Germany. *Re:Baltica* gets the impression that for countries like Latvia − small in size and with a local language − the situation is even worse. In an off-the-record meeting with the Latvian press, *FB* representatives acknowledged that there is no one on their team monitoring fake news in Latvian language. There apparently is someone monitoring hate speech, but *FB* representatives couldn't clarify who that individual is.

● There is no consensus among policy makers and KNAB officials whether Latvia's electoral laws should be changed to require political parties to submit detailed information about social media content (such as screenshots). Currently, KNAB compares the expenditures declared by political parties and social media companies. If there is a difference, it's a reason for deeper investigation.

● *Re:Baltica* agrees with a conclusion made by a House of Commons enquiry in the United Kingdom that "**just as the finances of companies are audited and scrutinised, the same type of auditing and scrutinising should be carried out on**

the non-financial aspects of technology companies, including their security mechanisms and algorithms, to ensure they are operating responsibly." *Re:Baltica* would like to see such a regulation implemented at EU level, as individual small states might struggle to implement it on their own.
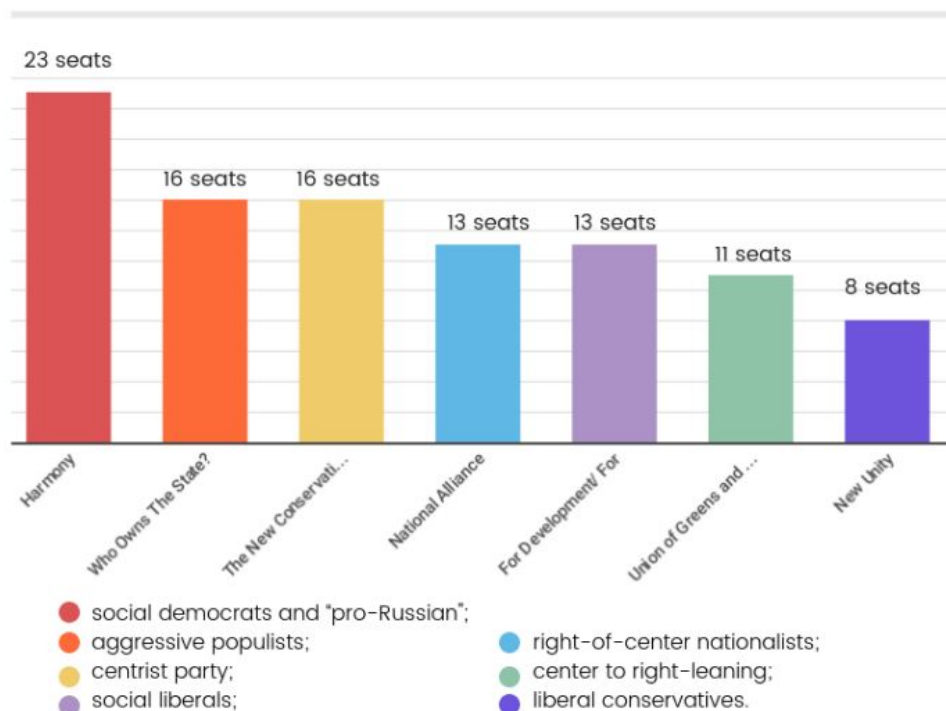
Context

Compared with other European countries and the US, which were concerned about potential interference by Russia into elections, Latvia's situation was different. The worries were the same, but were exacerbated by the nation's ethnic composition and geographical location next to Russia.

A quarter of Latvia's population of just under two million belong to a Russian-speaking minority. According to recent research, 82% of them watch Kremlin-controlled TV channels, which are freely available in the country. The Internet is polluted by seemingly independent news websites in Russian which, as our [investigation](#) showed, not only get their daily list of what to write about from the Kremlin-owned propaganda conglomerate *Rossiya Segodnya,* but are themselves owned by it. Therefore, if the Kremlin wished to meddle in Latvia's elections, social media is just tool with which it might do so.

Regarding the political landscape, it is fragmented and diverse. Seven parties surpassed the percentage threshold to enter the *Saeima* (parliament with 100 seats).

Results of Latvian parliamentary elections in 2018

- 🔴 social democrats and "pro-Russian";
- 🟠 aggressive populists;
- 🟡 centrist party;
- 🟣 social liberals;
- 🔵 right-of-center nationalists;
- 🟢 center to right-leaning;
- 🟣 liberal conservatives.

The hardline, openly pro-Kremlin *Latvian Russian Union* performed below the 5% level and failed to enter the *Saeima*. Its campaign was surprisingly poor – both in terms of financing and content – for a party that should naturally be one of the Kremlin's darlings. As a result, the Russian minority voices went for more popular and less openly pro-Kremlin *Harmony*. Nevertheless, *Russian Union* got more than 2% of the vote, which secures them state funding.

About the project

Re:Baltica is a non-profit investigative journalism centre based in Latvia. The Kremlin's soft power and propaganda campaigns in the Baltics is one of the major topics *Re:Baltica* has been covering for over six years.

The main goal of the project was to monitor political communication and messages on the web and social media prior to the parliamentary elections in Latvia in October, 2018. Each party list was allowed to spend a little over half a million euros (EUR 533 348) on campaigning.

We focused on:

1. Exposing sources of disinformation and false news.
2. Examining potential interference by the Kremlin.
3. Analysing the content of the political messages used by different politicians and their supporters.
4. Examining political advertisements (who paid for them, which accounts distributed them, who the target audience was and how correct the messages/facts were).

Methodology

Re:Baltica secured access to **two powerful social media analysis tools - *CrowdTangle*** and ***AdCollector***. It allowed us to effectively monitor the content of social platforms, especially *FB*, which is the most popular social media in Latvia, alongside *YouTube*. Both these platforms are visited daily by half of Latvia's population, according to *KantarTNS*.

CrowdTangle is one of the major content discovery and social media monitoring platforms which enables comparison of content that is gaining unusually high attention from users (overperforming). This let us draw conclusions on what messages politicians are most successfully getting across and into voters' minds. Nevertheless, because of privacy issues, *CrowdTangle* doesn't allow monitoring of content posted by private profiles (only *FB* pages and public groups), therefore, we can't exclude the possibility that important messages might have slipped our attention.

Political Ad Collector is a tool created by the leading American non-profit investigative journalism newsroom *ProPublica*. We asked our audience to upload the *AdCollector* extension, and as a result, we were able to collect and analyse all the paid posts these people saw on FB. Every week we published all the political ads we had collected.
Because of privacy issues, it's not possible to determine exactly how many people uploaded the extension, but on average we collected 200-400 political ads per week.

Distribution

In order to raise awareness and generate a greater impact, we produced news stories and summaries of the data which we distributed weekly to a consortium of our media partners,

which includes leading media organisations in the country. In addition, we produced a weekly newsletter in English. In total we distributed our content in Latvian, Russian and English, according to needs.

About the authors

Inga Spriņģe, project leader. Spriņģe is an award-winning Latvian investigative journalist and a co-founder of the Baltic Center for Investigative Journalism *Re:Baltica*.

Kristīne Žilde-Krēvica, editor. Žilde-Krēvica is a TV journalist and author of multiple TV documentaries. She holds an MBA degree from Riga Business School and a BA in Communication Science from the University of Latvia.

Madara Eihe, reporter at *Re:Baltica*. Conducted interviews and wrote news stories for media partners. Eihe is a graduate student at the University of Latvia, studying for an MA in Public Governance.

Matīss Rihards Vilcāns, data analyst, *Political Ad Collector.* Undergraduate student at the University of York, studying for a BA in Philosophy, Politics and Economics.