

Radicalization as a Threat to National Security: Insights from Latvia since Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine in 2022

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Russia's war in Ukraine has fueled political radicalization in Latvia with far-reaching implications for national security. This policy brief examines how radical attitudes and behaviours have evolved in Latvia's society – particularly online – under the influence of Russian propaganda, disinformation, and cyber operations since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022.

Latvia, in response to Russia's aggression and anxiety regarding its shared border, has embarked on a set of [political and symbolic actions](#) to secure national security and decouple from the Soviet past. These consisted of extensive [military](#), humanitarian, and [political support](#) to Ukraine, securing the national information space and shaping historical memory. The Latvian government has taken steps to prohibit [Russian state-owned media](#) and related online sites. [Soviet-era monuments](#) and symbols have been removed from public places. While these efforts were done in the name of preserving Latvian sovereignty, they also [caused discontent among Russian-speakers](#), many of whom perceived this as an attempt to rewrite history.

Thus, Latvia faces a risk of radicalization among specific segments of its population as a direct and indirect consequence of Russia's hybrid warfare. Hybrid threats have been systematically used to deepen societal cleavages and foment extremist sentiments. The Russian-speaking community (making up slightly more than one-third of Latvia's population) is a target of Kremlin propaganda, wherein Latvia is framed as "Russophobic", thus allowing Russia to spread its narratives among these populations.

This trend threatens Latvia's internal security and has an added strategic security dimension as a polarized and unstable Latvia, a key NATO member, would benefit Russia and its efforts to undermine the solidarity of the NATO Alliance.

The Issue

The war in Ukraine in 2022 resonated deeply within Latvian society, awakening longstanding historical grievances and fostering suspicion among ethnic groups. [The Latvian government noted](#) a "marginal increase in right-wing extremist activities" in 2022 and linked it to Russia's military aggression. While radicalization has not received much academic attention in Latvia, it has been the key focus of the Latvian State Security Service (VDD); thus, it is important to emphasize several factors that have underlined radicalization in Latvia since 2022.

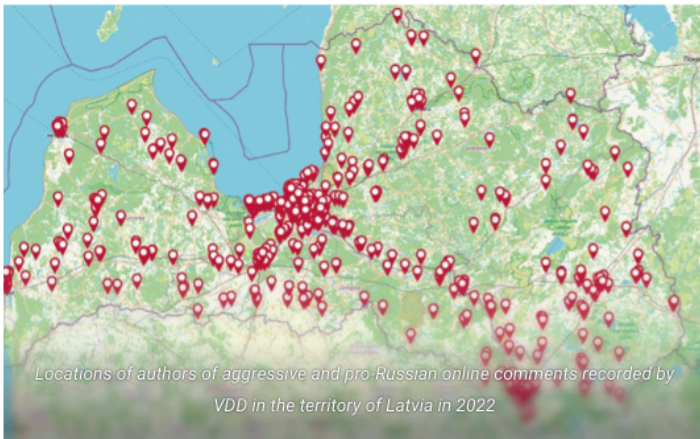
In 2022, the VDD outlined the [typical traits of a hostile commentator promoting Russia's narratives](#): a Russian-speaking male aged between 30 and 49 years, living in Riga or nearby areas, and a non-citizen of Latvia. These individuals commonly share material that promotes violence against government bodies, encourages ethnic hatred, calls for the destruction of the Latvian Freedom Monument, and supports messaging that either works to rationalize or celebrate Russia's aggression and military actions in Ukraine.

In early 2025, full liberation of Ukrainian territory from the Russian army was supported by 49% of Latvian-speaking respondents, compared to 17% among those from Russian-speaking households. In winter 2024, these figures stood at [68.1% and 19.1%](#), respectively. These long-standing differences between the attitudes of Latvian speakers and part of Russian speakers can be attributed to [Russian propaganda](#) tapping into deeply rooted beliefs, [values](#), and memory politics that date to the Soviet period. These differences may also act to further radicalize today in some parts of the Russian-speaking community.

Indeed, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the response by the Latvian government have accelerated the radicalization of a part of the Russian-speaking minority. In mid-2022, the Latvian government fast-tracked "de-Sovietization" policies, aiming to weaken Moscow's ideological foothold. Many Russian-speakers felt that their history and identity were being erased. [Only 9%](#) of Latvia's Russian-speaking population supported the removal of the Victory Monument in 2022. Meanwhile, 40% of Latvians acknowledged that attitudes toward local Russians had [grown more negative](#), and [37% of Russian speakers](#) reported that Latvians' attitude toward them had "significantly worsened" since the war's outset. This erosion of trust provides fertile ground for radicalization. Marginalized Russian speakers may become more susceptible to anti-state and anti-Western rhetoric.

The Role of Online Platforms in Radicalization

[The VDD observed](#) that both right- and left-wing extremist overwhelmingly rely on the internet organizing given their limited resources. In 2022 and 2023, social media served as the leading platforms for extremist public expression and networking.



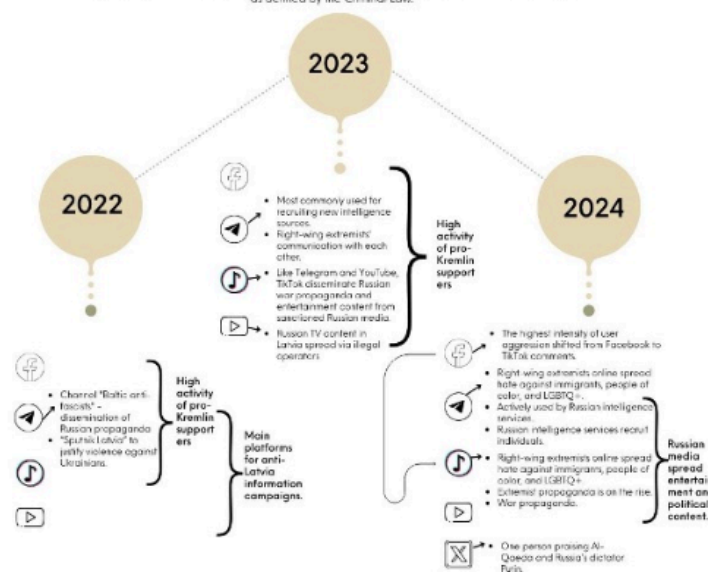
As the map on the left illustrates, in 2022, radical internet commentators in Latvia demonstrated record-high levels of [activity and aggression](#) in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, including organizing pro-Kremlin rallies in Soviet Victory Monument Park on May 9–10 and expressing dissatisfaction with the demolition of the Soviet Victory Monument on August 23–25. This contrasts to 2024, where, online aggression spikes were mainly triggered by the second anniversary of the invasion in Ukraine (February 24), Latvian Legionnaires' Remembrance Day (March 16), Russia's presidential elections (March 17), the Commemoration Day for the Victims of Communist Genocide on March 25, "Victory Day" for Russia (May 09); Ukrainian Vyshyvanka Day (May 16) and the dismantling or relocation of Soviet-era monuments and renaming streets bearing Soviet or Russian imperialism names. Although the maps show that the number of radical comments has decreased in certain regions, this does not indicate that radicalism as a whole is decreasing.

Notably, various social media platforms have facilitated the radicalization of some Russian speakers in Latvia. Between 2022 and 2024, Latvia experienced increased radicalization on social media outlets such as Facebook, TikTok, Telegram, and YouTube. [Telegram](#) was particularly prominent in disseminating [pro-Kremlin propaganda](#) through channels such as "[Baltic anti-fascists](#)," which legitimized violence in Ukraine and disseminated disinformation. TikTok has also played an important role in appealing to younger audiences through Kremlin-backed influencers parroting pro-Russian rhetoric. Furthermore, [Russian intelligence services](#) utilized the platform to [recruit individuals](#), gather [sensitive information](#), and exert [pressure](#) on government officials. Facebook remained a site for politically active pro-Kremlin propaganda, including posts by the Russian Embassy. The VDD monitored thousands of posts and videos, looking for aggressive terminology that might be linked to criminal activity.

Extremists exist mainly on Telegram and other online platforms to disseminate [hate speech against immigrants](#), ethnic minorities, and [LGBTQ communities](#). There was an increase in verbal aggression, especially in comments on TikTok. YouTube and TikTok also facilitated the spread of Russian war propaganda and entertainment content of sanctioned media that are banned in Latvia. [Despite bans](#), these platforms continued to be essential tools of anti-Latvian influence campaigns, blending [ideological content with entertainment](#) and fueling the broader spread of extremist content online.

Radicalization on social media platforms in Latvia (2022–2024)

Thousands of comments and videos published on Facebook, TikTok, Telegram, and YouTube were analyzed by the VDD to identify aggressive expressions potentially indicative of criminal offenses as defined by the Criminal Law.



[Analysts warn that TikTok's](#) algorithm can significantly distort reality for youth and Russian-speaking Latvians "immersed" in the platform, warranting more effective monitoring and even regulation of the app's misuse. In 2024, the VDD reported that a rise in [right-wing extremism](#) among young people was linked to the rising population of immigrants in Latvia. Officials have expressed concern that this may lead to more incidents of racially motivated violence.

"X" (Twitter) is less prevalent in Latvia's general population but plays an outsized role among activists. In 2024, a [bot-driven influence campaign on X](#) was found to be orchestrated by pro-Kremlin actors targeting the Latvian information space. According to researchers from the Bot Blocker project (antibot4navalny), the campaign generated approximately 200,000 Latvian-language tweets, reaching an estimated 800,000 views. Given that X has around 140,000 users in Latvia, the scale of this operation suggests a coordinated effort to manipulate public discourse and amplify pro-Kremlin narratives. Even more concerning is that [70% of surveyed users](#) reported using Twitter primarily to read content and comments posted by others.

Radicalization is closely connected with [hate speech](#). From January 2021 until November 2023, the Latvian Centre for Human Rights identified [2,414 instances of hate speech](#) on various sites with content created by Latvian internet users in both Latvian and Russian languages. Most were discovered on international social media networks like Facebook, TikTok, X (Twitter), YouTube, and Instagram. Thirty percent of all documented hate speech constituted incitement of or the legitimization of violence, murder, with some individuals showing signs of radicalization. Thus, social media's decentralization and anonymity make radicalization a diffuse and difficult problem to tackle through traditional means.

Disinformation, Propaganda, and Hybrid Threats

[Disinformation](#) and [propaganda](#) narratives serve as the oxygen for extremist ideas, while cyber-attacks and other hybrid operations create fear and chaos that opportunistic actors can exploit. [For years, Russian state media](#) and local pro-Kremlin activists promoted a narrative of Latvian state oppression against Russian speakers and historical revisionism (e.g., glorifying the Soviet "liberators" and denigrating Latvia's

independence). Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, these narratives have only intensified: Russian officials and propaganda outlets routinely accuse Latvia of "[Russophobia](#)" and cultural genocide against minorities. These efforts aim to mobilize anger and resistance among Russian speakers in Latvia.

After the [Latvian government banned Russian state](#) TV broadcasts in 2022, propaganda shifted to social platforms and [YouTube](#). Several Telegram news channels and Russian language "alternative media" websites spread false claims about Latvia and the war.

The overlap between Kremlin and local extremist narratives is considerable: both seek to undermine trust in the [Latvian government](#) and democratic institutions. This convergence suggests that foreign propaganda effectively weaponizes existing grievances, steering them towards more extreme positions.

Cyber-attacks form another component of hybrid threats contributing to the radicalization landscape in Latvia. From 2022 to 2024, pro-Russian hacker collectives (so-called "hacktivists") carried out [frequent cyber assaults](#) on [Latvian government](#) websites, infrastructure, and media outlets. Each successful breach or defacement is touted as evidence that Latvia is weak and vulnerable. This narrative can instill fear and panic among citizens and embolden pro-Russian radicals who see these cyber-actions as [support for their cause](#).

Conclusion

Latvia's experience with Russian hybrid warfare since 2022 illustrates how a modern democratic society can be tested by externally fueled radicalization. While the scale of extremist violence in Latvia remains low, the trends are moving in a worrisome direction – one that adversaries like Russia are eager to exploit. Latvia can curtail the appeal of radical ideologies and bolster its societal unity by reinforcing legal deterrents, investing in education and outreach, increasing regulation and oversight of social media platforms, and working hand-in-hand with international partners to strengthen its cyber infrastructure. Latvia aims to project a clear message that extremism –whether pro-Kremlin or ultra-nationalist – has no place in political discourse. It must also balance security with civil liberties and inclusion. Continued research and monitoring will be needed to stay ahead of evolving tactics. Latvia can mitigate the radicalization threat and serve as a model of resilience for other nations facing the complexities of hybrid warfare in the 21st century.

Policy Recommendations

Russian intelligence services are expected to [intensify and diversify their subversive activities](#) against Latvia in 2025, including continued espionage and other hostile operations. The following policy recommendations aim to address these threats. Countering radicalization in Latvia requires a comprehensive approach that accounts for both the supply of extremist propaganda and the vulnerabilities of at-risk populations. The following measures are recommended for Latvian policymakers: both the supply of extremist propaganda and the vulnerabilities of at-risk populations. The following measures are recommended for Latvian policymakers:

- A review should be conducted of the Latvian criminal code to ensure sufficient provisions to prosecute those who actively incite violence, hatred, and support aggression, whether online or in real-life situations.
- Continue to support increased investment and development of Latvia's law enforcement and intelligence institutions, specifically in their cybersecurity capacities.
- Integrate more robust media literacy curricula in both Latvian and Russian-language schools. Teaching young people how to discern disinformation, understand propaganda tactics, and critically evaluate social media content is crucial.
- Establish a dedicated Digital Intelligence Unit to monitor public online spaces for extremist and disinformation content. This unit would track trends on TikTok, YouTube, Twitter, Telegram, and fringe forums in real time, issuing alerts about viral falsehoods or hate campaigns so that authorities can respond quickly. It can collaborate with independent fact-checkers to debunk false narratives before they spread widely.
- Work with social media platforms to monitor hate speech and hold violators accountable. Given that much of the radical content originates on international platforms, Latvia should leverage EU regulations to strengthen its position vis-à-vis large tech companies.
- Increase cooperation with NATO Allies to support counter-hybrid efforts. Joint NATO exercises should include scenario simulations where hybrid attacks coincide with civil unrest, testing Latvian authorities' ability to coordinate with Allied strategic communications units.
- Work with Latvia's international partners to exchange knowledge and develop best practices on combating domestic extremism and radicalization.