

Perceptions of Russian information suppression by Baltic Russophones

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Do members of the sizeable Russophone minority in the Baltics perceive information suppression by authoritarian Russia differently than the banning of pro-Kremlin media by Western democracies?

Summary

This policy brief examines how Baltic Russophones perceive information suppression by Russia, and how they compare it to bans on pro-Kremlin media in Europe. While existing research has focused on effectiveness of Russian information suppression, public perceptions remain understudied. Focus group discussions with 55 Russophones in Latvia and Estonia show that many participants do not distinguish between Russia's authoritarian suppression practices and the security-driven bans on pro-Kremlin media implemented by Western democracies. The findings show that EU institutions, Latvian and Estonian governments, and civil society organisations need to adopt a more strategic and inclusive approach to restricting access to information. This includes clear communication on why restrictions on pro-Kremlin outlets differ from Russian authoritarian censorship, media literacy programs to counter the normalisation of authoritarian practices, and increasing perception awareness programs into national security policy to strengthen democratic resilience.

Russophones in the Baltics

Latvia and Estonia, EU member states since 2004, share a fraught history with Russia, shaped by annexation of Baltic territories into the Russian Empire and Soviet occupation. Both countries border Russia and host substantial Russophone minorities – a legacy of Soviet-

era migration and more recent arrivals following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Currently, 38% of Latvia's population and 29% of Estonia's population identify Russian as their mother tongue.¹ At the same time, this group is diverse with varied geopolitical leanings² and media preferences.³ While most are Latvian or Estonian citizens, a notable proportion retain Russian citizenship or have a non-citizen status.

In the post-Soviet era, Latvia and Estonia initially engaged pragmatically with Russia but shifted towards caution with Putin's rise and heightened assertiveness of Russian foreign

Key Messages

- Public perceptions of Russian information suppression remain underexplored
- Baltic Russophone focus groups reveal most do not see Russian suppression as authoritarian
- Many equate Russian suppression with Western media bans
- Perceptions shape responses to counter-interference policies
- Authorities must better explain democratic media restrictions
- Clear, inclusive communication strengthens societal resilience
- Media literacy remains essential to counter foreign interference



policy, which defines the “near abroad” as Russia’s special sphere of interest. Russia is now seen as the primary security threat, especially after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. As a result, both countries have increasingly aligned in their securitisation of Russophones by adopting policies that exclude them from the public sphere.⁴

Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU has implemented bans on pro-Kremlin media at the EU level, motivated by the need to prevent the spread of Russian disinformation, which the EU views as aimed at destabilising countries neighbouring Russia, the EU and its member states.⁵ In parallel, and with the same motivations, Latvia and Estonia have implemented additional bans on pro-Kremlin television channels, news sites, and other media outlets, with the Latvian media regulator imposing more extensive restrictions than its Estonian counterpart.⁶

Findings from the research

Previous audience research on Russian foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) has largely focused on Russian disinformation campaigns, while the suppression of information by Russia has received comparatively little attention. Previous studies have assessed the ways in which people in Russia have reacted to Russian information suppression⁷ and its effectiveness⁸; however, the perceptions people in Russia and elsewhere hold regarding Russian information suppression remain largely unexamined. Closing of this gap would help substantially to understand the formation of opinion regarding Russia among the EU population, providing input for better-informed policy measures.

In July 2025, Riga Stradins University conducted online focus group discussions with 55 Russophones in Latvia and Estonia. These targeted three cohorts: long-term residents; migrants from Russia who arrived after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 but before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022; and those who relocated following the invasion. Members of these three migration cohorts have different migration histories and varying levels of experience with Russian information suppression.

Russia is recognised as an authoritarian regime that imposes significant constraints on freedom of expression and restricts access to information critical of the government. However, the focus group research revealed that only a minority of Baltic Russophones identify Russia’s behaviour as part of authoritarian governance. For them, restrictions on freedom of speech and access to information in Russia are aimed at influencing public opinion and fostering regime loyalty. The majority view Russia’s information suppression activities as standard practice. They rationalise these actions as necessary for preventing unrest and safeguarding political and social order in Russia. These Baltic Russophones express a cynical view: they believe that absolute freedom of speech and unrestricted access to information are unattainable ideals, and that all countries engage in some form of information control.

In Russia, censorship is systemic and authoritarian, meaning that everything not supporting the official government line is blocked. [...] The goal of such propaganda is to control how people think and to cultivate loyalty among the population toward the ruling regime.

Male, 41 y/o, Tallinn

In Russia, they have their own order. I like that there’s order there, that people live by rules. You don’t have that situation where, you know, too much freedom turns into chaos. [...] Personally, I don’t support it when the media tries very hard to promote LGBT - almost like advertising it. In Russia, they say, ‘No, we don’t need to advertise this.’

Female, 27 y/o, Tallinn

These two dominant ways of interpreting Russian information suppression also shape how Latvia's and Estonia's Russophones make sense of the bans on pro-Kremlin media introduced by European democracies.

There is a small segment of those who draw a clear distinction between the objectives that underlie pro-Kremlin media bans in Latvia and Estonia and those that motivate Russian information suppression. For these individuals, the former are intended to counteract Russia's information warfare and address national security concerns. In this line of reasoning, bans on pro-Kremlin media outlets are considered legitimate and are frequently likened to the prohibition of Nazi propaganda during the Second World War. For this group, the historical trauma of Soviet occupation in Latvia and Estonia, as well as their geographical proximity to Russia, provides not necessarily a justification, but at least an explanation for pro-Kremlin media bans.

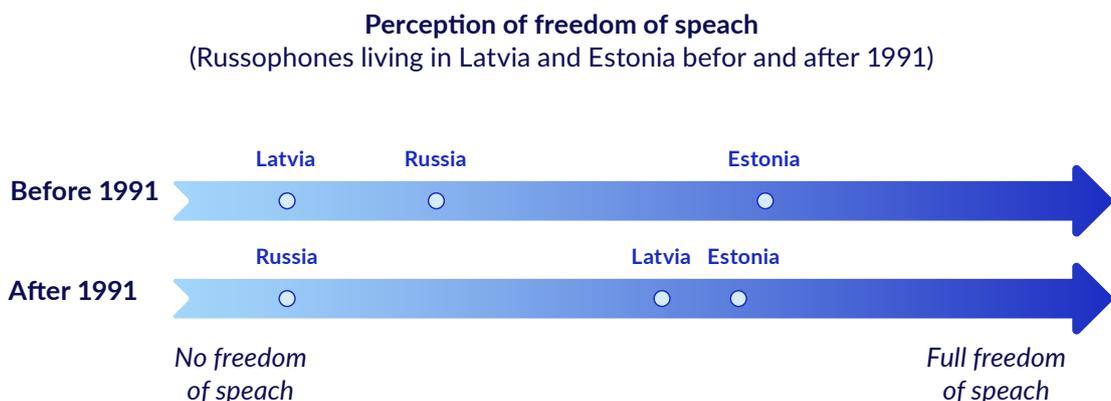
In contrast, most do not distinguish between the underlying objectives of information restrictions in Russia, Latvia, and Estonia. In their view, these measures are intended to limit access to alternative narratives and dissenting perspectives, whether motivated by concerns over political and social instability in Russia or by perceived threats of foreign influence and internal unrest among Russophones in Estonia and Latvia.

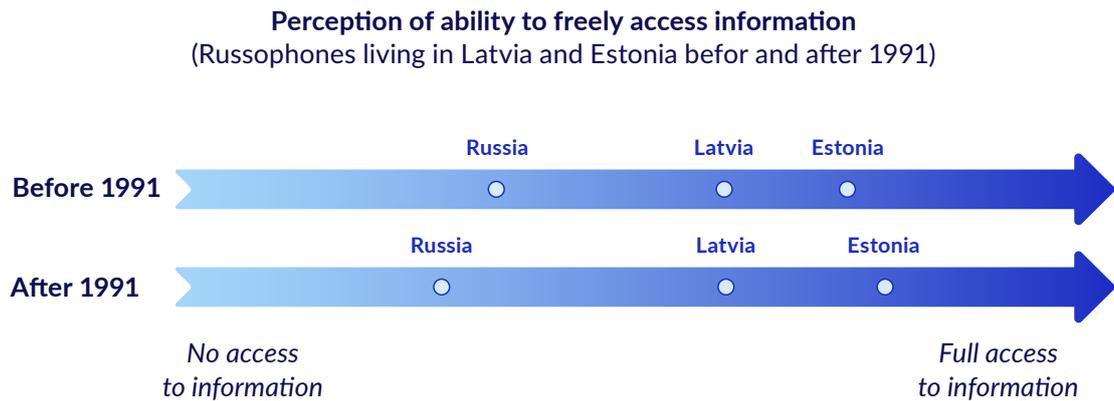
A similar pattern is evident in how Russophones in the Baltics compare the severity of information suppression in Russia to the pro-Kremlin media bans implemented in Latvia and Estonia.

Some participants view Russia's information restrictions as considerably more stringent, noting that they are accompanied by harsh repression. They emphasise that censorship in Russia is reinforced by pervasive state propaganda, the near-total absence of independent media, and more extensive curtailments of political freedoms.

Other Russophones – particularly those in Latvia – perceive restrictions on freedom of speech and access to information in Russia as less severe than those in Latvia. They argue that Russia imposes fewer limitations on internet access compared to Latvia (even though this is factually inaccurate). They also highlight instances of censorship and self-censorship within the media, as well as among ordinary citizens in Latvia.

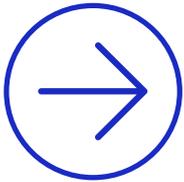
A unique feature of our focus group research is how we investigated whether there are differences between Russophones based on when they relocated to Estonia and Latvia. We found that Russophones who relocated from Russia to the Baltics after 1991 - especially those arriving post-February 2022 - are more critical of the state of freedom of speech and free access to information in Russia compared to individuals whose families resided in Latvia and Estonia prior to 1991.





Conclusion

A majority of Baltic Russophones does not perceive a difference between information suppression by Russia that is aimed at silencing oppositional voices and narratives and the banning of pro-Kremlin media that was introduced by European democracies in 2022 because of threats to the EU and national security.



Policy Recommendations

Policy debates in the Baltic States assume that Russian information suppression, such as the blocking of independent news websites and Western social media platforms, is universally perceived by people as authoritarian and illegitimate. EU and national policies in the Baltics often implicitly assume that people will naturally see restrictions on pro-Kremlin media in Europe as different, because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and historical experience of Russian domination in the Baltic region. This political mis-framing has direct consequences: while many Baltic Russophones normalise Russia's information suppression as understandable under exceptional circumstances, they do not extend this tolerance to the EU and national media bans. Instead, they appropriate liberal-democratic rhetoric that is commonly used in the Europe to condemn Russian censorship to delegitimise EU and national restrictions. This perception risks reproducing the very distrust that policymakers seek to counter, leading to Baltics Russophones' further alienation from home (host) country institutions, increased scepticism of democratic processes, and heightened susceptibility to Russian disinformation.

The policy problem should therefore be understood as twofold:

1. Countering Russia's malign influence needs to go hand-in-hand with managing peoples' perceptions of Western restrictions;
2. Addressing the normalisation of authoritarian practices among Baltic Russophones, to prevent further undermining of democratic norms and resilience.

To address these challenges, we propose the following policy recommendations:

- **Communicate the rationale for restricting Russian media clearly and inclusively.** Distinguish democratic safeguards from systemic authoritarian censorship, using tailored messaging through trusted Russophone intermediaries.
- **Challenge the normalisation of authoritarian practices.** Develop media literacy programmes with civil society to challenge such practices.
- **Integrate perception management into security policy.** Use targeted outreach to reduce Russophone alienation and strengthen resilience at national and EU levels.

In implementing recommendations, we encourage Baltic policymakers to engage with the European Centre for Democratic Resilience once it is established, by planning perception audits and integrating those insights into future security strategies. We also advise to explore possibilities to use the forthcoming Media Resilience Programme and anticipated civil society funding streams to deliver targeted communication and media literacy programmes for Baltic Russophones.

Notes:

¹ Official Statistics Portal. (2025). Mother tongue and language used at home by region in 2022 (per cent of the population in the relevant group). Available at: https://data.stat.gov.lv/pxweb/en/OSP_OD/OSP_OD_apsekojumi_pieaug_izgl/PIA77.px (accessed 26 September 2025) (the data refers to people aged 18–69)

; Raadik, H. M. (2022). Population Census. 76% of Estonia's population speak a foreign language. Statistics Estonia. Available at: <rahvaloendus.ee/en/news/population-census-76-estonias-population-speak-foreign-language> (accessed 26 September 2025).

² Kaprāns, M., & Mieriņa, I. (2019). Minority reconsidered: Towards a typology of Latvia's Russophone identity. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 71(1): 24–47. DOI: 10.1080/09668136.2018.1556250.

³ Vihalemm, T., Juzefovičs J., & Leppik, M. (2019). Identity and media-use strategies of the Estonian and Latvian Russian-speaking populations amid political crisis. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 71(1): 48–70. DOI: 10.1080/09668136.2018.1533916 ; Vihalemm, T., & Juzefovičs, J. (2022). Navigating conflicts through the media: The sceptical and self-responsible repertoires of Baltic Russian-speakers. *East European Politics and Societies*, 36(2): 423–445. DOI: 10.1177/0888325420964946.

⁴ Schulze, J. L., and Pupcenoks, J. (2025). Securitized Russian-speakers in Estonia and Latvia: The frame-policy nexus before and after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. *Nationalities Papers*: 1–25. DOI: 10.1017/nps.2024.97

⁵ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-state-owned-outlets-russia-today-and-sputnik-s-broadcasting-in-the-eu/> ; <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia/>

⁶ <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/features/media-literacy/pro-kremlin-tv-channel-ban-in-latvia-is-permanent-says-media-watchdog.a449173/> ; <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/features/media-literacy/all-russia-based-tv-channels-banned-in-latvia.a460236/> ; https://tja.ee/side_ja_meediateenuste_jarelevalve

⁷ Lokot, T. (2021). Articulating Networked Citizenship on the Russian Internet: A Case for Competing Affordances. *Social Media + Society*, 6(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120984459> ; Karalis, M. (2024). Fake leads, defamation and destabilization: how online disinformation continues to impact Russia's invasion of Ukraine. *Intelligence and National Security*, 39(3), 515–524. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2024.2329418> ; Alyukov, M., Kunilovskaya, M., & Semenov, A. (2023). *Getting Messages Across: War Propaganda in Russian Press and Social Media* (July - September 2022). Final Monitoring Report. Russian Election Monitor. www.russian-election-monitor.org/slippery-astro turf-of-the-kremlin-war.html

⁸ E.g. Kazun, A. (2019). To cover or not to cover: Alexei Navalny in Russian media. *International Area Studies Review*, 22(4), 312–326. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2233865919846727>; White, S., & McAllister, I. (2013). Did Russia (Nearly) have a Facebook Revolution in 2011? *Social Media's Challenge to Authoritarianism*. *Politics*, 34(1), 72–84. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12037>

About the ARM Project

Coordinated by the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), the ARM project delves into authoritarian strategies for information control beyond borders. While foreign disinformation receives ample scrutiny, other forms of foreign information manipulation and intervention (FIMI) remain overlooked.

Analysing Russia, China, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, ARM conceptualises and addresses different forms of FIMI. The project will explore the extent that major global players like China and Russia, alongside Ethiopia and Rwanda, engage in transnational information suppression, particularly targeting European diaspora communities.

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