

# ONLINE ANALYTICS PORTAL AS AN INFORMATION WARFARE TOOL OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND ITS IMPACT AFTER 24 FEBRUARY 2022. CASE STUDY: RUBALTIC.RU

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**Abstract.** The article attempts to analyse the information warfare tool of the proxy source. This was done using the example of the RuBaltic.ru portal, also showing it against the background of two other tools of warfare: news-front.info and Geopolitica.ru. The study shows that after Russia's assault on Ukraine began, the portal essentially became a tool for internal propaganda in Russia, as well as among the Russian diaspora in countries that did not identify it as a proxy source. Thus, it is not currently fulfilling the role for which it was intended. Nevertheless, it should be monitored, and democratic countries in Europe that have not done so to date should consider restricting access to it due to the possible negative social effects of its impact in the context of the still ongoing war.

**Keywords:** Ukraine, Russia, information warfare, proxy source, RuBaltic.ru

## 1. Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, for years the West underestimated the threat posed to it by the Russian Federation established on its ruins, which inherited mental and geopolitical aspirations from its predecessor. Only the events of 2014 began to influence the modification of Western optics, and the experiences of the 2016 elections in the USA and the Brexit referendum confirmed the belief that Russia is in a state of unspoken, permanent civilisational conflict with the Euro-Atlantic community. This seems to confirm the, still criticised, thesis of the esteemed Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington from the early 1990s which stated that “the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations”<sup>1</sup>. At that time, however, post-Soviet Russia was undergoing

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<sup>1</sup> **Huntington, S. P.** 2011. *Zderzenie cywilizacji i nowy kształt ładu światowego*. Warszawa: MUZA SA, p. 7.

redefinition processes, and the direction of its transformation seemed to be completely different from where it is now.

It seems that Dominique Moïsi, a French political scientist and writer, was also right in his “The Geopolitics of Emotions” published several years later and thus from a different perspective, describing Russia as, on the one hand, a growing power (along with China and India), and on the other hand, however, as a humiliated power which, while striving to achieve and maintain a strong position on the international arena, also assumes the use of force. He also recognised that, in standardising globalisation, the tone of geopolitical transformations is set by an identity that stands in opposition to it<sup>2</sup>.

It seems that this conglomerate has made Russia prepare for a confrontation with the West for more than two decades, an emanation of which is also the comparison in which information is both the object of attack and the weapon. Even though such a thesis is currently quite a widespread view<sup>3</sup>, there is no shortage of voices indicating that its essence lies elsewhere.

Russia has created an elaborate system of propaganda and disinformation covering various channels of communication. In addition to official sources, these include state broadcasters but also so-called proxy sources which, posing as objective media, promote Kremlin propaganda and disinformation. Among them are internet portals which are an important part of the system reinforcing the message and, as a supposedly neutral source, also trying to make it credible. This was pointed out as early as the middle of the past decade by Joel Harding<sup>4</sup>, Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews<sup>5</sup>, among others.

This article attempts to analyse a selected type of propaganda and disinformation tools of the Russian Federation which are the so-called proxy sources. The Rubaltic.ru portal was selected for the case study, the issue orientation of which includes the so-called Baltic states and also Poland. News Front and

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<sup>2</sup> **Moïsi, D.** 2012. *Geopolityka emocji*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, pp. 34–37.

<sup>3</sup> This is also how Russia is perceived in Polish foreign policy. See: **Marcinkowski, T.** 2020. *Federacja Rosyjska w polityce zagranicznej rządu Zjednoczonej Prawicy w latach 2015–2019. Rosja a bezpieczeństwo Polski w nowym (nie)ładzie międzynarodowym*. – Tymanowski, J.; Skwarski, A.; Moch, N. (eds). *Rosja w procesie wyzwań – między demokracją a autorytaryzmem*. Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy “Elipsa”.

<sup>4</sup> **Harding, J.** 2015. *Russian News and Russian Proxy News Sites*. – *To Inform Is to Influence*, 15 November.

<sup>5</sup> **Paul, Ch.; Matthews, M.** 2016. *The Russian “Firehose of Falsehood” Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It*. – RAND Corporation, Published Research. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html> (01.06.2023).

Geopolitica.ru, much more well-known portals, it seems, have been made the point of reference. The research questions that were asked concern the activity and range of influence of the selected portal, taking into account its disinformation and propaganda influence after the Russian aggression in Ukraine. To analyse the problem outlined in this way, the system method, desk research, critical analysis, the behavioural method and the IT tool Similarweb for analysing domains were used.

This article consists of three parts. The first presents a characterisation of information warfare and the Russian Federation's contribution to its development. The second part discusses intermediary sources, identifying Front News and Geopolitica.ru as their examples. The third part analyses RuBaltic.ru.

## 2. Russian information warfare

The term information war/warfare is a relatively recent concept, coined in the early 1990s, and its conceptual scope is still ambiguous. Some approaches propose a very broad perception of it, some focus on military aspects, while others narrow it down to aggression against critical infrastructure. The complexity of the infosphere—the information environment—seems to speak in favour of a holistic definition. The proposal of the South African futurologist and researcher in the field of global security, Rianne van Vuuren, is part of this trend, assuming that it includes wider activities, stating that “Information warfare is defined as actions focused on destabilizing or manipulating the core information networks of a state or entity in society with the aim to influence the ability and will to project power as well as efforts to counter similar attacks by an opposing entity and/or state”<sup>6</sup>.

Van Vuuren decided that the definition scope proposed by him covers three of its manifestations: war/netwar, psychological operations, and cyber war/warfare. The first of them refers to conflict at a social level, involving means other than traditional war in which the network nature of organisational forms and related doctrines, strategies and information technologies are used. Participants of such struggles will most likely function in small and dispersed groups without centralised management, communicating and coordinating their activities via the Internet. The second manifestation, psychological operations, refers to the intangible sphere to make the human mind an

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<sup>6</sup> **Van Vuuren, R.** 2018. Information Warfare as Future Weapon of Mass-disruption, Africa 2030s Scenarios. – Journal of Futures Studies, Vol. 23(1), p. 80.

area of conflict, and the criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of cognitive impact are culturally conditioned. Both of these components of information war/warfare take place in the cognitive sphere. The third of its elements, cyberwar, lies in the technological sphere and its conceptual scope includes conflict related to force implemented in cyberspace, i.e. in the virtual world and not the physical one<sup>7</sup>.

This should lead us to the conclusion that information war/warfare is characterised by networking, cognitive and technological disruption, manipulation, power projection and advantage generation, strengthening network organisation and interactions, transforming the global network into a social environment of political and security importance, offensiveness and defensiveness, lack of geographical restrictions, relatively low costs, and universality and accessibility which enable its use as part of asymmetric activities, also creating conditions for its conduct not only by military entities. Its importance will grow proportionally to the pace of technological development and the growing importance of the Internet, and its transdisciplinary nature will cover an ever-wider range of human activities<sup>8</sup>.

The Russian concept of information warfare<sup>9</sup>, unlike its Western perception, is much broader in nature as it also contains activities in times of peace. It includes an extensive catalogue of activities and processes aimed at stealing, substituting, intercepting, manipulating, distorting or destroying information. It involves an equally vast set of channels and methods from computers to smartphones, real and fictitious news media, statements from leaders or celebrities, Internet troll campaigns, text messages, “vox pops” from concerned citizens, YouTube videos, and individualised targeting of the recipients<sup>10</sup>.

In a special report published in August 2020 by the Global Engagement Centre of the State Department entitled “Pillars of Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem”, this system was defined as “...the collection of official, proxy, and unattributed communication channels and platforms that

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> There are at least a few terms to describe the activities described here, including information confrontation (used in strategic and military circles) assuming the involvement of an arsenal of information weapons also in peacetime, and “active measures” being a long-term disinformation impact. It seems that during the Cold War its equivalent was the term “psychological warfare”.

<sup>10</sup> Giles, K. 2016. Handbook of Russian Information Warfare. Rome: NATO Defense College, pp. 3–4.

Russia uses to create and amplify false narratives”<sup>11</sup>. It has been pointed out that it has five pillars: official government communications<sup>12</sup>, state-funded global messaging<sup>13</sup>, the cultivation of proxy sources<sup>14</sup>, social media arming<sup>15</sup>, and cyber-disinformation<sup>16</sup>.

The diverse nature of the tools included in them means that campaigns implemented by them can be their own initiatives which are reactions to the dynamics of socio-political reality. At the same time, these activities are not unified by definition. This is supposed to strengthen their impact by introducing numerous variants of the same messages into the infosphere, adapting them to diverse recipients, and at the same time it is supposed to guarantee the possibility of denial when proxy broadcasters are the visible source of the narrative. This solution also generates a multiplier effect enabling a wider resonance. This variety of propaganda and disinformation narratives causes truth-seekers to be confused by stimulation from the oversupply of information<sup>17</sup>.

The authors of the analysis published in January 2023 by one of the world’s most renowned think tanks, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace<sup>18</sup>, entitled “Russia’s Information warfare and regime security”<sup>19</sup>, point

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<sup>11</sup> **Global Engagement Center Special Report** 2020. Pillars of Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem. United States Department of State, p. 3. [GEC 2020]

<sup>12</sup> These include statements by the Kremlin or Russian ministries, official Russian social media posts, and declarations or statements by Russian officials.

<sup>13</sup> This includes state-funded media directed abroad, state-funded media targeted at the home society, foreign state-funded media, and international Russian socio-cultural institutions.

<sup>14</sup> These include measures related to Russia with a global reach, measures that take into account local specificities, conscious propagators of Russian narratives, unconscious propagators of Russian narratives, and strengthening the narrative of a foreign state.

<sup>15</sup> This includes infiltrating national conversations, persistent campaigns that undermine trust in institutions, and reinforcing protests and social conflicts.

<sup>16</sup> This includes hacking and disseminating, hijacking websites, cloning websites, spoofing, and disrupting official sources or objective media.

<sup>17</sup> GEC 2020, pp. 5–6.

<sup>18</sup> Which by the way, after the Russian aggression in Ukraine, was forced by the Russian government to liquidate its Moscow office (along with other human rights organisations).

<sup>19</sup> **Wilde, G.; Sherman, J.** 2023. No Water’s Edge: Russia’s Information warfare and regime security. Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace [Wilde, Sherman 2023]. The phrase that opens the title is a metonymy of the “state border” where internal disputes should stop when the interests of the country on the international arena are at stake. The term was used at the very beginning of the Cold War by Senator Arthur Vandenberg who, as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, worked with the Truman administration to develop a bipartisan consensus. This construct was referred to by Tom Daschle, a Democratic

out that even if there is a unified theory of Russian information warfare its main assumption may be a continuation of the tradition of Russian strategic thought in the form of a marriage of the regime's security and information warfare.

Gavin Wilde and Justin Sherman therefore believe that the Kremlin's information war should not be perceived through the prism of aggressive and expansive foreign policy, but from the level of the internal security of the regime, stating "...it's as much a counterinsurgency as an expeditionary strategy, less an escalation than a projection"<sup>20</sup>. They also believe that antagonistic automatism (the West vs. Russia) should be avoided as it reinforces uncertainty and exaggerates the Russian information warfare arsenal.

For almost a quarter of a century of Putin's rule, no single coherent doctrine of information warfare has been created. On the other hand, a whole series of doctrinal, conceptual, political and strategic documents have been published, setting the priorities of the Russian information machinery and, equally important, defining the Kremlin's perception of the information environment and conducting competition and confrontation in this area. Undoubtedly, however, they conceptualise a holistic approach to information security, going far beyond the sphere of technology and deepened by the irrational conviction that Russia's foreign interests and regime stability are threatened in the infosphere. The best expression of this is its definition which takes into account social, cultural and internal stability, but also classic and modern means of controlling the flow of information.

*The thinking captured in Russian strategy documents – note the authors of the report – indicates that Russian information warfare is foremost an egocentric expression of systemic self-preservation. To conclude otherwise is to inflate Moscow's sense of dominance over the information ecosystem and lend too much credence to a regime that struggles to keep its domestic insecurity from expanding beyond the water's edge [state borders – JS].<sup>21</sup>*

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Party senator who in the article "The Water's Edge" published in the mid-1990s condemned the partisanship confusing American foreign policy in the post-Cold War world and called for bipartisanship in the most important foreign policy issues such as proliferation, defense structure and its financing, military and technological revolution, Russia, and the Middle East and China, seeing them as significant threats. See: **Aldous, R.** 2016. Serving the National Interest. The Truman-Vandenberg partnership realised the Marshall Plan, NATO, the UN Charter, the CIA, the Defense Department and the Air Force. – The Wall Street Journal, 13 April. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/serving-the-national-interest-1460585027> (01.02.2023); **Daschle, T.** 1996. The Water's Edge. – Foreign Policy, No. 103, pp. 3–19.

<sup>20</sup> **Wilde, Sherman** 2023, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

### 3. Proxy-source

Information warfare uses formally independent information sources to disseminate harmful content and propaganda narratives and influence the public. Proxy sources play an invaluable role in Russia's propaganda and dis-information system. The formal independence of some of them may even be factual, while their ideological convergence cannot be questioned<sup>22</sup>. Their number seems difficult to estimate also due to the fact that some are in a state of lethargy, waiting, it seems, for the optimal opportunity to attack. The most widely-known Russian proxies include News Front and Geopolitica.ru.

The first of them, News Front, established during the Russian invasion of Crimea and still based there, is available in eleven languages<sup>23</sup>, including Polish, and presents itself as an information agency that “objectively reports events from around the world, with particular reference to Russia, Donbas, Ukraine, the Balkans, Syria, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Moldova”. Until recently, it had its editorial offices in Bulgaria, Serbia, Germany, France, Spain, Great Britain and Hungary. It also boasts that most of its correspondents are volunteers from different countries who share the system of values presented by the portal. It is supposed to provide its readers with a diverse range of forms of journalistic communication that can be read or watched and it confirms its objectivity with the statement “Our viewers/readers draw their own conclusions”<sup>24</sup>. However, this is contradicted by the statements and actions of the editorial office which itself admits that it is at the front of the information war against the enemies of the Russian Federation.

The owner of the portal is Media Group News Front LLC which registered the portal in 2015 as a private news agency. Its head, but also the head of the News Front TV channel, is Konstantin Knyrik, a 33-year-old graduate of the National University “Odesa Law Academy”, an active participant in the Russian spring in Crimea, a Russian politician, journalist and expert on federal TV channels, and a former head of the Crimean branch of the regional party “Rodina”. He is also, a.o., head of the information centres of the Crimean Front and the Southeastern Front. Since September 2022 he has also been an

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<sup>22</sup> **Marsili, M.** 2021. The Russian Influence Strategy in Its Contested Neighbourhood. – Mölder, H.; Sazonov, V.; Chochia, A.; Kerikmäe, T. (eds). *The Russian Federation in Global Knowledge Warfare. Influence Operations in Europe and Its Neighbourhood*. Springer, pp. 150–151, 161.

<sup>23</sup> Russian, English, Bulgarian, German, Spanish, Serbian, French, Hungarian, Georgian, Slovak and Polish.

<sup>24</sup> **About.** <https://news-front.info/about/> (01.02.2023).

adviser to the acting governor of the Kherson region, V. V. Saldo, as well as chairman of the Kherson regional branch of the all-Russian public organisation of small and medium-sized entrepreneurs “Support of Russia” (“Opora Russia”). On the portal’s website he proudly reports that his name is on the sanctions lists of the USA, EU, UK, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Belgium and Switzerland. For his participation in the Russian spring in the Crimea he was awarded the medal of the Russian Federation’s Ministry of Defence “For the return of Crimea” as well as the state decoration of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic “For merits for the Donetsk People’s Republic of the 3<sup>rd</sup> degree” and a number of other state decorations. For active participation in information transmission from the front in the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics with the Kiev “regime” he was awarded the cross of the Union of Donbas Volunteers<sup>25</sup>.

In 2020 News Front was identified by Facebook as part of an extensive disinformation network consisting of 46 webpages, 91 accounts, 2 groups and 1 Instagram account<sup>26</sup>.

Another disinformation and propaganda platform is Geopolitica.ru, registered in 2008 and available in thirteen languages<sup>27</sup>. Its attitude towards the world is expressed by the maxim with which Cato the Censor, a Roman politician, ended his Senate speeches, calling for another, third Punic War which brought an end to the Carthaginian Empire *Carthago Delenda Est* (Carthage must be destroyed).

On this Russian nationalist portal one can read that its mission is to promote a multipolar world based on the order of “Great Spaces”. Its community is fighting, as the words were used, for a new Nomos of the Earth which will ultimately contribute to the overthrow of the existing Euro-Atlantic world order in favour of, as this community hopes, an Eurasian one. “This nomos – one can read on the website – must be radically different from the unipolar globalist model, based on the dictatorship of a liberal ideology.” Its authors also claim to reject all three political theories of European modernity

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<sup>25</sup> **Konstantin Sergeevich Knyrik.** <https://news-front.info/konstantin-sergeevich-knyrik-biografiya/> (01.02.2023).

<sup>26</sup> **NewsFront and SouthFront.** **April 2020 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report**, 05.05.2020. <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/05/april-cib-report/> (30.10.2020); **Marcinkowski, T.; Sikorski, J.** 2023. The European Union’s policy towards the COVID-19 crisis and the Russian contribution to infodemic. – Moch, N.; Wereda, W.; Stańczyk, J. (eds.). Information, Security and Society in the COVID-19 Pandemic. Routledge.

<sup>27</sup> Russian, English, Spanish, Italian, Serbian, Arabic, French, German, Dutch, Polish, Portugal, Turkish and Urdu.



in favour of a so-called fourth political theory. They believe that communism and fascism have already failed and that liberalism threatens to monopolise political discourse and submerge the world in universal sameness, degrading cultural distinctiveness and uniqueness.

Behind such ideas stands Russian philosopher and ultra-nationalist, also lecturer at M. V. Lomonosov Moscow State University, Aleksandr Dugin who is involved in a constant information war against Western values, and permanent cooperation of the portal with other entities of the Russian propaganda and disinformation system consisting of the mutual publishing of its content, extending the range of his message. They cover a whole range of means, from the aforementioned News Front, through the Canadian portal “Global Research”—which promotes conspiracy theories and lies, whose founder and president is professor of economics, anti-globalist, son of a Russian Jewish immigrant Michel Chossudovsky<sup>28</sup>—to official media financed by the Kremlin<sup>29</sup>. The Geopolitica.ru portal has also published articles by Adomas Abromaitis, a fake persona attributed by Facebook to Russian military intelligence (GRU) and various think tanks linked to various extents with Dugin<sup>30</sup>.

Another interesting example of a proxy source is the RuBaltic.ru portal whose media coverage seems to be evolving along with the Kremlin’s information policy.

#### 4. Propaganda portal Rubalic.ru

While News Front describes itself as a news agency (although of course incorrectly), Geopolityka.ru is a strongly ideologised propaganda portal. A less ideologised portal, undoubtedly also a source and issuer of Russian propaganda and disinformation, is Rubaltic.ru.

In undertaking an analysis of the portal, the following questions were posed:

1. What is the ideological face of the portal’s creators and editors;
2. What is the structure of the portal;
3. What was the intensity of published content in a year of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine;
4. What was the intensity of non-Russian language content published on the portal;

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<sup>28</sup> **About.** <https://www.globalresearch.ca/about-2> (01.02.2023).

<sup>29</sup> **GEC** 2020, p. 50.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

5. To what extent did Russia's aggression against Ukraine change the previous activities of the portal;
6. How were attempts made to make the portal credible;
7. What interest did internet users have in the portal before and after Russia's aggression in 2022;
8. What was the national structure of the portal's audience;
9. What digital community networks does the portal have at its disposal?

The editorial staff presents it as an impartial source of information and analysis. Its mission is to objectively reflect the described events with the participation of representatives of the scientific community, experts and journalists from Russia and the countries of the so-called post-Soviet area<sup>31</sup>. However, even a cursory review of the content on the site's pages allows one to quickly assess the role and goals that its creators set for themselves. It is dominated by content aimed at deepening the aversion and antagonism between potential recipients who are defined on the one hand by the non-Russian languages in which the portal tried to communicate at some point (Belarusian, Lithuanian, Latvian and Polish)<sup>32</sup>, and on the other hand by the very name of the portal, referring after all to the Baltic region which was primarily supposed to be worked on. The editorial office, however, goes beyond this area in its remit, commenting much more tendentiously than reporting on events from Central, Eastern and Northern Europe. In their messages, they definitely shape and fuel a general aversion to the West as such. Both current affairs and sensitive and contentious historical issues are used for these purposes<sup>33</sup>.

The portal was launched at the beginning of 2013 on the initiative of, as stated, scientists from Kaliningrad and Moscow specialising in the study of the post-Soviet area, with particular emphasis on the countries of the Baltic region. However, the domain itself (rubaltic.ru) was registered in mid-2010 from a private address in the .ru zone<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> **O портале.** <https://www.rubaltic.ru/about/> (01.02.2023).

<sup>32</sup> Among language versions of the portal, the lack of Estonian draws attention.

<sup>33</sup> **Sikorski, J.** 2020. Polska w obliczu rosyjskiej ekspansji informacyjnej. Zarys problemów. – Tymanowski, J.; Skwarski, A.; Moch, N. (eds.). Rosja w procesie wyzwań – między demokracją a autorytaryzmem. Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy "Elipsa", p. 167.

<sup>34</sup> **Whois.** <https://www.nic.ru/whois/?query=rubaltic.ru&searchWord=rubaltic.ru> (31.01.2023).

The creator of the portal and its first editor-in-chief, Sergei Rekada, is a graduate of Lomonosov University, a doctor of historical sciences, currently the Director General of the Centre for Integration Prospects Studies, an associate professor of the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, and an expert on the Russian International Affairs Council<sup>35</sup>. Currently he only cooperates with the portal while the editorial office is headed by Aleksandr Nosovych, a political scientist, graduate of Baltic Federal University in Kaliningrad, and author of several propaganda books, including those on the alleged collapse of the Baltic states<sup>36</sup>.

Mikhail Khodorkovsky's "Dossier" Centre and "Tālava Taurejēs", a portal disseminating information on international threats to Latvia, linked both of them a few years ago with a network of agents created by Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) General Vladimir Chernov and Reserve Colonel Yevgeny Umerenkov, also recognising these officers as curators of the portal<sup>37</sup>. Even then, the Estonian and Lithuanian intelligence agencies indicated the threats posed by the website's activity<sup>38</sup>. The portal's colours are also clearly demonstrated by the fact that ,immediately after last year's attack of the Russian Federation on Ukraine, it was hacked and a letter with the signature of Nosovych was published on its pages, strongly condemning the aggression<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> **Рекеда Сергей Вячеславович.** <https://fedpress.ru/person/2867768> (1.2.2023); **Рекеда Сергей Вячеславович.** [https://www.perspectivecenter.org/about/employees/rekada\\_sergey\\_vyacheslavovich/](https://www.perspectivecenter.org/about/employees/rekada_sergey_vyacheslavovich/) (1.2.2023).

<sup>36</sup> **Александр Носович.** <http://loveread.me/biography-author.php?author=Aleksandr-Nosovich> (18.2.2023); **Александр Носович.** <https://www.rulit.me/authors/nosovich-aleksandr-aleksandrovich> (18.2.2023); **Александр Носович.** <https://russia-rating.ru/носович-а-а> (18.2.2023).

<sup>37</sup> **Как Кремль вмешивается во внутреннюю политику соседних стран. Часть шестая: «Подкрышники»,** 22.11.2020. <https://dossier.center/pribaltika/> (18.2.2022); **Tweets from 26.08.2022.** <https://twitter.com/TTauretajs/status/1563062710450790402> (18.2.2022).

<sup>38</sup> **Литовская разведка обвинила RuBaltic.Ru в дискредитации властей республики,** 04.02.2020. <https://www.rubaltic.ru/news/12022020-estonskaya-razvedka-vklyuchila-rubalticru-v-spisok-ugroz-natsbezopasnosti-/> (20.2.2023); **Эстонская разведка включила RuBaltic.Ru в список угроз нацбезопасности,** 12.2.2020. <https://www.rubaltic.ru/news/12022020-estonskaya-razvedka-vklyuchila-rubalticru-v-spisok-ugroz-natsbezopasnosti-/> (20.2.2023).

<sup>39</sup> **Сайт портала RuBaltic.Ru подвергся хакерской атаке,** 01.03.2022. <https://www.rubaltic.ru/news/01032022-sayt-portala-rubalticru-podvergsya-khakerskoj-atake/> (31.1.2023); **Носович, А.** 2022. Агрессия против RuBaltic.Ru отбита: специальное обращение главного редактора, 08.03.2022. <https://www.rubaltic.ru/editorial/20220308-agressiya-protiv-rubalticru-otbita-spsialnoe-obrashchenie-glavnogo-redaktora/> (31.1.2023).

The Russian version of the site is much more extensive and includes podcasts, videos, a section with reprints and a library with a dozen or so reports including, for example, those on the crisis in the EU, the suppression of freedom of speech in Europe, political repression in the Baltic states and the problems of Polish-Ukrainian relations<sup>40</sup>. In 2022 alone, about 6,370 texts were published on this basic language version of the portal, most of them coming, unsurprisingly, in February and March (649 and 633, respectively). As many as 45 of them appeared on February 24 alone. At that time, a new tab “Special Operation in Ukraine” was also created there. By the end of the year 1,839 publications had appeared in it<sup>41</sup>.

Pages in other languages are not copies of Russian-language versions and contain much fewer articles. Although, apart from the Belarusian version, the first foreign-language texts were posted there already at the beginning of the website’s operation, only the Lithuanian one published them continuously until 2022. Naturally, this version has the largest number of them (438), followed by Latvian (195), Polish (159) and Belarusian (126).

The fact that there was a sharp increase in the number of non-Russian-language publications in 2019 draws one’s attention (see Chart 1). This year also seems to be special here for other reasons. While in the previous one—at least in the Polish version—an in-depth analysis of the political situation in Poland by Dr. Michał Patryk Sadłowski from the University of Warsaw<sup>42</sup> was included, later publications present a low, if not very low, level of content and the language they are written in resembles the language of a tabloid rather than a portal with opinion-shaping aspirations. At the same time, it is difficult to resist the impression that the editors prepared their own texts, at least in Polish, using an imperfect translator.

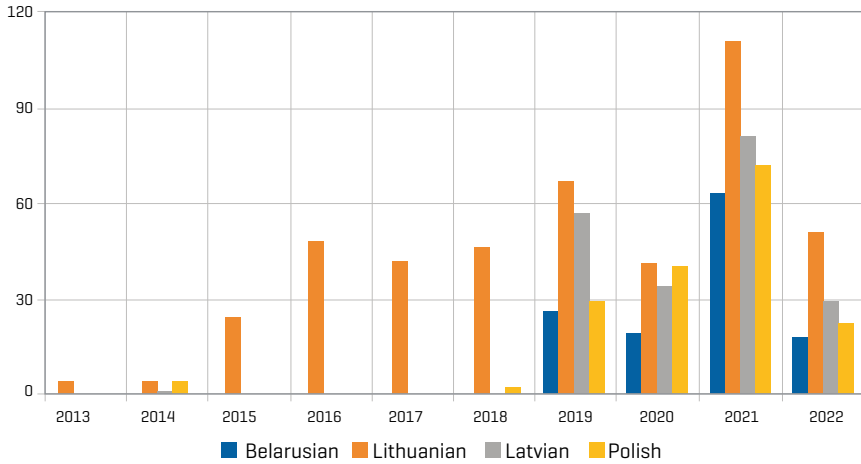
It is also worth paying attention to the portal’s efforts which were supposed to make it credible, for example by publishing a list of experts on its pages. Although it has been stated that they are not members of the editorial office, it is difficult to have any doubts as to the intentions of the originators.

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<sup>40</sup> **БИБЛИОТЕКА RUBALTIC.RU.** <https://www.rubaltic.ru/library/> (18.2.2022).

<sup>41</sup> **First of them was: Путин объявил о специальной военной операции на Украине.** <https://www.rubaltic.ru/news/24022022-putin-obyavil-o-spetsialnoy-voennoy-operatsii-na-ukraine/> (14.02.2023).

<sup>42</sup> **Sadłowski, M. P.** 2018. Gambit Kaczyńskiego, czyli co oznacza rekonstrukcja polskiego rządu?, 18.01.2018. <https://pl.rubaltic.ru/politics/18012017-gambit-kaczynskiego-czyli-co-oznacza-rekonstrukcja-polskiego-rzdu/> (18.2.2022).



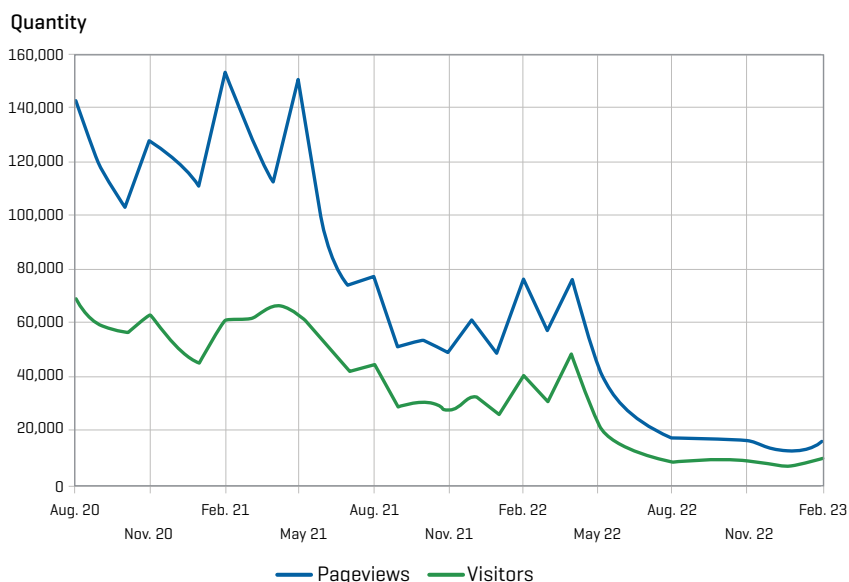
**Chart 1.** Non-Russian articles published in RuBaltic.ru from 2013 to 2022. Source: RuBalti.ru, own calculations [15.02.2022]

The list is relatively long and includes representatives from as many as 19 countries—apart from the obvious ones—including the United States, Germany, Israel, Italy, France, Finland, India and Poland. The latter list includes eight people: scientists (political scientists, sociologists), publicists, analysts, cultural activists, and also politicians. The presence of Mateusz Piskorski in this group is not particularly surprising, while some of the others including, for example, Adam Rotfeld, a diplomat, politician and scientist, definitely is. However, the latter appeared on it in connection with the one and only interview he gave to the portal in 2013 on the normalisation of Polish-Russian relations<sup>43</sup>. Piskorski himself was hosted in these pages several times, but only in 2014<sup>44</sup>.

<sup>43</sup> **Адам Ротфельд: польско-российские отношения встали на нормальные рельсы**, 18.11.2013. <https://www.rubaltic.ru/article/kultura-i-istoriya/adam-rotfeld-polsko-rossiyskie-otnosheniya-vstali-na-normalnye-reysy18112013/> (31.1.2023).

<sup>44</sup> ПИСКОРСКИ Мареуш (PISKORSKI Mateusz). <https://www.rubaltic.ru/experts/polsha/piskorski/> (31.1.2023). In May 2016 he was temporarily arrested by officers of the Internal Security Agency (pol. Agencja Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego) on charges of espionage for Russian and Chinese intelligence. In May 2019, after his group the pro-Russian Change party paid a property surety, this temporary detention was revoked. He became a contributor to Russian pro-Kremlin media. During Russia's invasion of Ukraine, he appeared in Belarusian state media. He is a translator and promoter of "The Manifesto of the Great Awakening and the Writings of War Time" by Alexander Dugin. In March 2020 he was an interpreter for First Lady Agata Kornhauser-Duda during a meeting with war refugees from Ukraine. **Grzegorzcyk, Ł.** 2019. Piskorski wyszedł na wolność. Oskarżony o szpiegostwo już udzielił

Average traffic on the Rubalic.ru portal in 2018 oscillated between 50–60 thousand visits per day, which in the light of analyses covering the last several months seems to be a relatively high result. In May 2021 liveinternet.ru statistics showed similar values. Since then, however, the number of visits to the website has been steadily decreasing, although with some fluctuations. From the turn of March and April 2022, the decrease is drastic and the number of visitors to the portal by the end of the year was in the range of 7–9 thousand. (See Chart 2)<sup>45</sup>.



**Chart 2.** RuBaltic.ru webpage statistics from July 2020 to February 2023. Source: liveinternet.ru [15.02.2023]

wywiadu Rosjanom, 21.05.2019. <https://natemat.pl/273411,kim-jest-mateusz-piskorski-oskarzany-o-szpiegostwo-wychodzi-z-aresztu> (27.05.2022); **Nycz, M.** 2022. Oskarżony o szpiegostwo tłumaczem pierwszej damy na spotkaniu z uchodźcami, 12.03.2022. [https://www.rmfm24.pl/raporty/raport-wojna-z-rosja/news-wp-oskarzony-o-szpiegostwo-tlumaczem-pierwszej-damy-na-spotk,nId,5888694#crp\\_state=1](https://www.rmfm24.pl/raporty/raport-wojna-z-rosja/news-wp-oskarzony-o-szpiegostwo-tlumaczem-pierwszej-damy-na-spotk,nId,5888694#crp_state=1) (13.3.2022); **Kusier, K.** 2022. Zapowiadana promocja książki Aleksandra Dugina w Gdańsku się nie odbędzie. Przynajmniej na ten moment!, 26.10.2022. <https://gdansk.naszemiasto.pl/zapowiadana-promocja-ksiazki-aleksandra-dugina-w-gdanskumar/c1-9059009> (27.10.2022).

<sup>45</sup> Rubaltic.ru website statistics. <https://www.liveinternet.ru/stat/rubaltic.ru/index.html?period=month&id=0&id=5&id=8&id=7&id=4&id=9&id=10&id=6&id=ratio&show=przebudowa%C4%87+grafik&report=index.html%3Fperiod%3Dmonth> (15.02.2023).

Additional data on the popularity of the website is provided by a tool from Similarweb. The study covers the last quarter of last year and shows that during this period the total number of visits to the portal was 622,257, which gives us an average of 6,764 visits per day. On average, the website was visited by 148,142 unique visitors per month. The average time of visit was one minute and 15 seconds. The so-called bounce rate—which means that people entering a particular page of the portal in most cases do not browse it—was then 79.61%. On average, one visitor viewed a page and a half<sup>46</sup>.

The main readers of the portal are users accessing its pages from Belarus (30.99%) and Russia (30.88%). The following places in this ranking are covered by Estonia (11.70%), Lithuania (7.77%), Kazakhstan (7.55), Ukraine (2.24%), Latvia (1.73%), Germany (1.71%) and the USA (1.09%). The top ten closes with Sweden at less than one percent. Directly behind it comes Great Britain<sup>47</sup>.

The portal also communicates with the world through several online social networks. Its account in Odnoklasniki with 72,000 followers is the most popular<sup>48</sup>, then YouTube with 38,000<sup>49</sup> and Facebook with over 20,000<sup>50</sup>. Other accounts are Telegram<sup>51</sup>, V Kontakte<sup>52</sup>, Twitter<sup>53</sup> and Instagram<sup>54</sup>, with just over a thousand to just over 3,000 subscribers. What is characteristic is that in two media of Western provenance, i.e. on Facebook and Twitter, between February and June 2019 accounts were also set up in Belarusian, Lithuanian, Latvian and Polish<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> Similarweb 2023. Website Analysis: rubaltic.ru., February, p. 2. [Similarweb 2023]

<sup>47</sup> Poland is not included in the list of 35 countries. It should be noted that in several cases in the period of question there was a rapid, or even very rapid, increase in visits compared to the previous quarter. For example, there were now as many as 936% more entries from Italy (to the level of 0.42%), and as much more as 841% from Germany, from France by 276% (to 0.44%), and from the USA by 95% more. Of course, there are also noticeable decreases. They concern e.g. Belarus (-64.14%) and Ukraine (-57.81%). The Baltic countries also recorded decreases: Lithuania -25.67%, Estonia -8.52%, and Latvia -8.5%. Similarweb 2023, p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> RuBaltic.Ru. <https://ok.ru/rubaltic> (31.01.2023).

<sup>49</sup> Baltologiya. [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC\\_Su3m3Wqv4LDTZGfQvwsHg](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_Su3m3Wqv4LDTZGfQvwsHg) (31.01.2023).

<sup>50</sup> RuBaltic.Ru. <https://www.facebook.com/rubaltic> (31.01.2023).

<sup>51</sup> Baltologiya. <https://t.me/rubaltic> (31.01.2023).

<sup>52</sup> RuBaltic.Ru. <https://vk.com/rubaltic> (31.01.2023).

<sup>53</sup> @RuBaltic.Ru. <https://twitter.com/RuBALTICru> (31.01.2023).

<sup>54</sup> Rubaltic.ru. <https://www.instagram.com/rubaltic.ru/> (31.01.2023).

<sup>55</sup> RuBaltic.Ru – Bielaruski. <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100068970807159> (17.02.2023); RuBaltic.Ru – Latvijas. <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063574751220> (17.02.2023); RuBaltic.Ru – Lietuviu. <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100028409427109> (17.02.2023); RuBaltic.Ru – Polski. <https://www.facebook.com/rubaltic.polski> (17.02.2023).

Despite the numerous tendentious propaganda and disinformation messages, the RuBaltic.ru portal is relatively rarely recorded in the EastStratCom false reports database operating at the European External Action Service. In a current collection of more than 15,000 false narratives, the website was found as their source and distributor only 121 times<sup>56</sup>, while the aforementioned News Front and Geopolitica respectively attained 878 and 297<sup>57</sup>. I would see the reasons for this state of affairs, after all, in the limited resources, including human resources, of the Task Force and the relatively limited impact of the portal in the European infosphere, apart from the Baltic states of course. For them, and for Moldova too, the portal is in fact a serious threat to security and public order. This is reflected, for example, in the decisions taken after the Russian invasion of Ukraine to block the website<sup>58</sup>.

## 5. Conclusions

In the light of the presented data, it should be stated that the RuBaltic.ru portal is a tool of the Russian propaganda and disinformation machine, to a large extent devoting its attention to the conflict caused by Russia. The increase in its activity on non-Russian subpages since 2019, as well as the dedicated accounts created at that time in Western social media, seem to indicate that it was supposed to play a greater role than ever before in the informational impact on the region. Meanwhile, these plans were put to an end by the institutional and social reaction to the Russian invasion. Since March 2022 the

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<sup>56</sup> For the first time as early as early 2016. From the period since the attack on Ukraine, there are only two entries in the EastStratCom database. The last, dated 30 January 2023, based on a TASS report on the alleged transfer of military biological equipment by the US to Poland and the Baltic states, allegedly to be tested on the Ukrainian population, among others. Disinfo Database RuBaltic.ru. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-results/?text=RuBaltic> (20.02.2022); Disinfo: The Pentagon aims to test biological weapons on people in Ukraine. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-pentagon-aims-to-test-biological-weapons-on-people-in-ukraine> (15.02.2023); США перебросили в Польшу и страны Балтии военно-биологическое оборудование, 30.01.2023. <https://www.rubaltic.ru/news/30012023-ssha-perebrosili-v-polshu-i-strany-baltii-voennobiologicheskoe-oborudovanie/> (15.02.2023).

<sup>57</sup> Disinfo Database News Front. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-results/?text=News+Front> (20.02.2022); Disinfo Database Geopolitica.ru. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-results/?text=Geopolitica.ru> (20.02.2022).

<sup>58</sup> Носович, А. 2022. Нас не заставить молчать, пока нас читают: в Прибалтике заблокировали RuBaltic.Ru, 21.3.2022. <https://www.rubaltic.ru/editorial/20220321-nam-ne-zakryt-rot-poka-nas-chitayut-v-pribaltike-zablokirovali-rubalticru/> (20.02.2023); Носович, А. 2023. Спецслужбы Молдовы признали успехи портала RuBaltic.Ru и заблокировали его в республике, 07.02.2023. <https://www.rubaltic.ru/editorial/20230207-spetssluzhby-moldovy-priznali-uspekhi-portala-rubalticru-i-zablokirovali-ego-v-respublike/> (20.2.2023).



portal has only been published in Russian and, with the exception of Twitter, its accounts in Western social media are also inactive.

Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that RuBaltic.ru is not currently meeting its goals of reaching citizens of democratic countries in the region with the Russian narrative. However, it is still and above all a propaganda and disinformation tool against the inhabitants of Russia and Belarus as well as the Russian diaspora. This, of course, does not necessarily negate the possibility of its negative impact on the Western World. It is for this reason that this interceding source of the Russian narrative should be constantly monitored in order to adequately prevent its dissemination and to modify the counter-narratives on an ongoing basis as required.

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