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URTĖ ANDRIUKAITYTĖ

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RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION EFFORTS IN THE BALTIC STATES: CASE OF NATO IMAGE IN *RUSSIA TODAY*

Master's Thesis

Supervisor: Nerijus Maliukevičius

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Confirmation

I confirm that I am the author of submitted paper: **RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION EFFORTS IN THE BALTIC STATES: CASE OF NATO IMAGE IN *RUSSIA TODAY*** which has been prepared independently and has never been presented for any other course or used in another educational institution, neither in Lithuania, or abroad. I also provide a full bibliographical list which indicates all the sources that were used to prepare this assignment and contains no un-used sources.

Urtė Andriukaitytė

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Summary

The thesis examines external NATO identification assertions from the point of view of Russia-funded news agency *Russia Today*. Pro-Kremlin media unambiguously construct negative NATO image, notwithstanding the fact that its mission and activity is highly praised by the Western World. Therefore, this research was conducted in order to figure out what are the main arguments behind Russia's approach and what are the prior messages, targeting the information recipients. In order to answer the stated question, analysis of disinformative articles, delivered by pro-Kremlin media, was conducted. The results showed that *Russia Today* use various framing mechanisms and narratives to prove to the national as well as international audience that NATO is an aggressive and destabilizing organization.

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Introduction

Since early 2010s, Russia stepped into whole new level of the propaganda game. Varying in forms and shapes, Russia's propaganda continues to be displayed in advancement of all the ongoing conflicts as well as targeting closest Eastern European countries or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (further – NATO) allies. The Baltic countries are the region's largest recipients of online 'trolling' attacks, as well as a target for propaganda attacks. Tension between NATO members and Russia, in the face of any possible military conflict, has been felt for many years now. Combining the differing perspectives and Russia's capabilities to create and outspread propagandist messages, a very interesting and barely discovered field opens for a deeper research. In spite of inability to completely avoid or stop the spread of developing Kremlin propaganda, numerous measures might be taken to diminish the impact of propaganda and to avoid dramatic consequences. Despite that it is prospering and has advanced considerably through the past years, yet, still have its noticeable tendencies.

Many people tend to believe that propaganda games ended together with the Cold War. Unfortunately, as time has shown, the absence of worldwide war does not necessarily mean the absence of propaganda. The usage of algorithms, automation, and big data to shape public life – is becoming a pervasive and ubiquitous part of everyday life. The creation of disinformation or manipulated media is the most common communication strategy. In vast majority of countries around the world, cyber troops actively created content such as memes, videos, fake news websites or manipulated media in order to mislead users.[1] The generation and the spread of online disinformation is becoming a worrying, wide-reaching phenomenon, which can result in having a serious impact on many European countries. That brings up the nonnegotiable necessity to show that it only got better, more persuasive and way harder to notice from the first look. It dates back to 2008, if not even before that, to widely known Georgia-Russia conflict. Not only the remarkably grown influence over Georgia made it special to Russia: hardly concealable changes in Russia's approach to its propaganda took the stage. And has never left it ever since. Most clearly propaganda was demonstrated during the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula back in 2014. Conflict has not only opened eyes for all the Russia's neighbors, including the Baltic states, of what Russia is capable of on international level, leaving behind all the rules and legal measurements, but showed the whole world, what a huge, yet illegal force it may be and what important drawbacks the rotten international law system ended up having. Adding to this, many different tools were taken into

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[1] Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard, "The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of OrganizedSocial Media Manipulation", University of Oxford: United Kingdom, 2019, 15

reconsideration of the event, such as spread of propaganda and the indescribable power of it. As immediately after the takeover on February 28, 2014, Russian security personnel managed not only to shut off all of the Ukrainian television channels, but also, to impose a really tight blockade on the land border with the mainland Ukrainian territory and to close the Simferopol airport's flights from Ukraine and thus prevent the diffusion on Crimea of Ukrainian printed media (which are still issued mostly in the Russian language). The surrounded population of Crimea was thus subjected to only one-sided information and often outright disinformation by the Russian state-controlled mass media. The super intense propaganda campaign, almost like that during the Cold War depicted the interim Ukrainian authorities in Kyiv as "fascists" or "neo-Nazi" who presumably threatened the Russian and Russian-speaking population with "genocide".[2] Anyway, pro-Kremlin propaganda didn't confine itself there: Russia's disinformation continues to be displayed in advancement of all the ongoing conflicts as well as targeting closest Eastern European countries or NATO allies.

The ongoing Russian information warfare comes in many different shapes and forms. Despite the fact, that Russia's approach to propaganda still at least partly builds on techniques of Soviet Cold War Era (active front organizations, agents of influence, fake stories in non-Soviet Media, forgeries, etc.)[3], the country has taken an obvious advantage of technology and brought the propaganda to whole other level. Reaching millions of people out and influencing their attitudes through social media, radio, various TV channels, translating desired messages through publicly well-known and admired people – Russians always seemed to have a wide selection of ways and tools to affect the audience. It is important to notice, that even though Russian propaganda is now prospering, yet still have its noticeable tendencies.

Moving away from propagandist towards its recipients, as only two years ago, back in 2019, one of the most important and influential international alliances in the whole world under the name of NATO splendidly commemorated the 70th anniversary; a kind of tribute to this organization will be expressed in the thesis. This Alliance caused opposing views of it from the very beginning, setting up the member countries and those, not included into organization, in totally opposite positions. Despite all the generous and important work, it has done throughout the years, NATO still remains being targeted by hateful disinformers around the world and especially, from the Russian side. The tension between NATO and various alliances that Russia eventually has been a part of,

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[2] Anton Bebler, "Crimea and the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict", *Romanian journal of European Affairs,* 15 (1), 2015.

[3] Nicholas J. Cull, et al. "Soviet Subversion, Disinformation and Propaganda: How the West Fought Against it An Analytic History, with Lessons for the Present"; The London School of Economic and Political Science, 1-8, 2017 <http://www.lse.ac.uk/iga/assets/documents/arena/2018/Soviet-Subversion-and-Propaganda-how-the-west-thought-against-it.pdf>

could have been noticed for many years now, more accurately – for 70 years, from the very creation of NATO. Even unsuccessful negotiations between Federation of Russia and NATO should not be totally forgotten, as they may prompt about some kind mortification or even taken as a particular insult for Russia's international stance.[4] Bearing all of this in mind, not surprisingly, a fair amount of disinformation attacks has been and still remains, up to this day, aimed directly against the Alliance of NATO and its separate members.

Moreover, reconsidering the reasoning of harsh Russian foreign policy towards the Baltic countries, different arguments might be taken into consideration. To begin with, Russia has been involved in various international conflicts since the very first day that the Soviet Union collapsed and the Russian Federation got recognized as a solely individual state, back in 1991. Herewith, the very first reason could be seen – having in mind that the Soviet Empire has been cracking up for a while before the final collapse, the Baltic countries still have had a great impact of fast-forwarding the whole process and bringing the final countdown of the Soviet Union nearer at much faster pace. Despite other conflicts, varying in opponents, conflict's duration and the level of aggression that Russia has taken or is still taking a part in, Baltic countries, more or less, have always taken the opposing side of the barricades. As one of many examples may be taken the annexation of already mentioned Crimea and the fact that Lithuania officially did not recognize and strongly condemned the annexation of Autonomous Republic.[5] As Baltic countries still seem to be carrying a heavy Soviets' burden, honest and friendly relationships between them are still pretty hardly imaginable, so the negative side of ties can be inspected closely.

Taking all of the variables into consideration, a natural question follows up, questioning NATO image presented while using enormous Kremlin disinformation campaign. Therefore, the **central research question of the thesis** is: **what are the main frames directed against NATO Alliance that pro-Kremlin media is constantly using within the Baltic countries**. To answer the main question, **goal of the thesis** is formulated as follows: **to seize detailed image of NATO, constructed in main Russian foreign media outlet _Russia Today_.** This paper has been considerably structured to extensively reveal the image of NATO created by the pro-Kremlin disinformative source and presented primarily within the Baltic States. Detailed further research must be carried out in this particular field, in order to accomplish foreseeable tasks – revealing very

[4] Julianne Smith, _The NATO - Russia Relationship: Defining Moment or Deja Vu?_. Washington: Center for Strategic International Studies: 2008, 11-13

[5] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, "Lithuanian MFA supports the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's Crimea Declaration of 25 July", Vilnius, 2018. <https://urm.lt/default/en/news/lithuanian-mfa-supports-the-us-secretary-of-state-mike-pompeos-crimea-declaration-of-25-july-> [2020 04 12]

details of created NATO image, unfolding framing mechanisms used, observing whether they change or remained the same during the time and estimating possible consequences.

Literature Review

To develop the analysis as fluently as possible, a clear and structured overview of already accomplished research in the similar field is necessary and highly recommended. Literature that is publicly available on Russian propaganda, its relation to NATO and main messages targeted specifically against the Baltic countries, allows to establish what disinformation campaign consists of, its primary goals and ways to be carried out successfully to the desirable recipients. In addition to that, an overview provides the audience with a large number of elements which are claimed to demonstrate the success, or lack thereof, of corresponding disinformation measures. Though the evaluation of Kremlin propaganda and its outcomes is, naturally, a core element in the most of recent research, what actually constitutes its "success" and the amount of influence made – remains vastly controversial. Mainly, there are two types of literature used in the following work: on one side, there are sources that fluently guide towards the analysis, as they present the measures and theoretical basis for it. This type of literature not only reveals what has not been researched yet, but also shows how can one do it properly, reveals what reoccurring phrases are being used the most, what narratives are being repeated and what topics are the most popular within disinformers. Particularly these sources get the vast majority of attention and are presented in the literature review in the most detailed way. The second type of literature are the articles from specific disinformative portal – usually way shorter in the number of pages but just as useful and important in the analysis, as they provide the primary information about constructed image of NATO and gives an opportunity to analyze the differences (or similarities) within the Baltic countries and draw some general conclusions after all.

Starting with the analysis of Russian propaganda in the region, firstly, it should be distinguished, what exactly it is. How it differs from persuasion or advertising? What is the difference between propaganda and disinformation, and don't people use them as very similar words? For these questions and many more, as well as a proper representation of theoretical approach towards propaganda and disinformation, wide overview of different models are presented in a work, or better yet – real manual of disinformation, by Alexander Lanoszka from University of

Waterloo, called "Disinformation in International Politics".[6] As despite the importance of disinformation topic, mainstream theories in International Relations offer contradictory guidance on how to think about disinformation, this author provides readers with different perspectives towards the issue. That way, he creates a possibility to better understand the uncertainty of the issue and allows choosing most suitable theory to work on. Furthermore, paper presents three significant barriers, which, according to the author, a disinformation campaign must overcome in order to have strategic effects, especially in relation to states' abilities to generate military power through alliances or armaments. As the thesis is willing to reveal the working measures taken by Russians, three main obstacles to overcome can be useful to better understand the complexion of Kremlin's tactics. Just as valuable might be a short overview of Russia's propaganda in the Baltic States[7] that would fall into a bigger picture of Eastern Europe in the thesis.

Second in the list goes "Russian Social Media Influence – Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe" written by Todd C. Helmus and many colleagues of his. This book intended to examine content on social media and the broader propaganda threat posed to the region of former Soviet states. In that specific way, it has some similarities with the intended analysis, as it is also mainly focusing on Russian disinformation, part of the study analyses many different articles, but the authors combine many different methods to conduct the study. There are few more visible differences, as the scope of research is way broader and the authors pay attention not only to the Baltics, but also to Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus and some other countries, so the main focus is being interrupted. Also, no separate conclusions are being presented, while the whole part of Eastern Europe is taken as a single unit with identical characteristics. In this book, only a few brief mentions of NATO have been spotted, without giving any kind of significant role to it. And finally, authors analyzed only Russian-language content, while this paper is being targeted towards material, written and presented to the audience in English.

Moving on, there is another piece, highly valuable for research, written by Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik and called **"**Russian Propaganda: Methods of Influence in the Baltic States".[8] Just as well, this particular work offers some similarities to the paper, as it also highlights that undeniable role of Russian propaganda in the region, and differently than the previous book presented, is also aiming solely towards the very same area of the Baltics. Nonetheless, it is

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[6] Alexander Lanoszka, "Disinformation in International Politics", *European Journal of International Security*, University of Waterloo: Belgium, 2019, 1-22

[7] Lanoszka, "Disinformation in International Politics", 15

[8] Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik, "Russian propaganda: methods of influence in the Baltic States", Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe, 2016, *Vol. 14, No. 2,* 43-59

concentrated on the methods applied by the Russians to spread the fake news and presents only general overview of all three countries, besides separating neither country themselves, nor any particular and individual aspects. According to the author, the transmission of the disinformation is vertical since the way of conveying information is carefully designed, top-down programmed and has long-term effects. Confusion and informational chaos are created through persuasion, suggestion and manipulation, strengthening the status quo of the current authority, supporting local authorities and limiting possibilities for the growth of new political elites. Piece reveals how the authorities create and control the intended message, what are the most important methods of persuasive actions and, last but not least, what are the ways of counteracting propaganda.[9]

Further on, reaching Andrew Radin and his work called „Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses ". Once again it possesses some similarities, such as: clear understanding of emerging threat of Russian propaganda and the same geographical scope of analysis. The two main differences are clearly seen in the name of the book, as the spread of disinformation is just a part of hybrid warfare and no close attention is spent particularly to it. Also, main concentration is directed towards the methods or tactics to counter the pro-Kremlin attacks of various forms. This source has been concluded by a list of several implications for U.S. and NATO policies to limit the potential for Russian hybrid aggression and, what is extremely important, NATO has been viewed as a tool to control the spread of propaganda, not as a target of it itself. That opens up a field for a further research, to attentively investigate NATO from a whole different point of view.

After looking through necessary and helpful literature, that helps to distinguish field of the future research, it is also necessary to analyze, what has already been done for a smoother future analysis. Moving away from theoretical towards entirely practical examples, real and examined Russia's tactics to spread disinformation are being encountered. An Associate Director at Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) Lukas Andriukaitis presents a short overview of one of the main News Outlet in Russia – "*Sputnik News*", articles from which will not be examined deeply in the thesis but is very similar to the main portal of the thesis, considering its size, funding, partiality and ties to Kremlin. In a paper called "Baltic *Sputnik News* Interests Only Other Sputnik News", author pays close attention to the website which is a part of a large Russia-funded news website platform.[10] By examining its outreach and the backlinks related with three *Sputnik News* domains operating in three Baltic States, while using one of the top social media analytics tools *Buzzsumo,* he provides the readers with a good glimpse to the backdoor of the Kremlin-funded

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[9] Kuczyńska-Zonik," Russian propaganda: methods of influence in the Baltic States", 43-59

[10] Lukas Andriukaitis, "Baltic Sputnik News Interests Only Other Sputnik News", DFRLab, 2019,

media. The research made and unusually high percentage of backlinks from other *Sputnik News* websites spotted, only confirms the fact that the Baltic *Sputnik News* outlets do not interest other websites to refer to them at all and that a likely deliberate cross-promotion cycle is set-up to provide as much coverage as possible.[11] Having all this in mind, an accurate approach towards this particular website and articles taken from it, can be applied and some basic arguments for Russia-funded media and the ways it operates in general may be applied.

It is compulsory to rethink, whether the paper and research made could create any kind of academic value. That is why a short overview how it fills up any blank spots in this particular field of propaganda, has been made. First of all, obviously, Russian disinformation within the Baltics has always been and still remains a topic of heated debate, that is why there are no questions about the relevance of this specific topic. Further, most of the works that have been written within the boundaries of this field take into consideration tactics and tools for the spread of disinformation rather than what messages they intend to send to the targeted audience – and that is the innovative aspect of the thesis. Recently, just last year, already mentioned and very important 70 years anniversary of NATO has been commemorated, so it can be found obligatory to celebrate it in a very specific and academic way. For some further arguments, it can be added, that hardly any academically relevant works about external NATO image were found, and there have been no recent public studies conducted in the last 3 or 4 years at all, presumably because, such regions as Ukraine or Georgia, due to later dates of open conflicts, took over the stage and moved the Baltics at least slightly a bit to the back of relevance scale. Nevertheless, it remains to be an important topic, demanding a closer look.

Taking all of the above-mentioned arguments into a short consideration, the very idea behind this thesis and research, is that seldom does anyone consider what exact kind of image Russians are actually trying to convince the audience with. According to the results of public research, even 50% of Russians viewed NATO in strongly negative terms.[12] The intensification of anti-NATO rhetoric, emerging in Russian public discourse has been creating troubling and very important implications for NATO-Russia relations and, thus, for constructed NATO image within citizens and targeted post-Soviet region, including the Baltic states. As picturing the Alliance highly negatively is hardly a surprise, the actual frames and arguments behind them still remain unclear. Is NATO pictured as a major physical threat within the Baltic countries? Or is it just taking advantage

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[11] Andriukaitis, "Baltic Sputnik News Interests Only Other Sputnik News"

[12] Bret Schafer, "Ally or Adversary? Public Opinion of NATO in Post-Soviet Russia", USC Center on Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School: California, 2016, 1-2

of naive, way smaller and, ostensibly, more fragile Europe countries? What kind of political, social, economic or militaristic narratives are applied to the audience within three countries? Do they all really get the same anti-Russian messages, ignoring the numbers of Russian minorities within countries or historical relationships with Russia? Even though the image of NATO presented by pro-Kremlin disinformation source supposing is negative, hardly anyone analyzed how exactly it is presented and what are the main, reoccurring frames that are being taken into action of convincing crowds.

To make the research more valid, a NATO image, constructed in other regions might be taken into consideration to create an ability to compare it to the one, that will have been found within the Baltic States once the analysis is finalized. For example, in Balkans, Russian disinformators put loads of effort to demonize the United States and NATO, presenting them together with European Union as a weak unit which is strongly divided.[13] Moreover, NATO is stated to be a dysfunctional bloc, blamed even for racism or fueling ethnic tensions, while at the same time, Russia and the Soviet Union are being presented as powerful protectors throughout history.[14] In general, Russian disinformation operations attempt to undermine the European Union and NATO, as well as diminish their impact in the whole region of Balkans. Taking that into account, it can be beneficial to compare, whether NATO image presented by Russian disinformation channels in Balkans corresponds with the one presented and spread within the Baltic States.

To answer all of the above raised questions and properly execute foreseen tasks, whole thesis is based on the constructivist approach. The main focus is driven towards the theoretical assumptions of Michael Barnett whose conceptual architecture is used in the research. As for the methodological part, framing theory is mainly applied as a central and beneficial tool to analyze and explain constructed NATO image from the point of view of Russian disinformative information source.

Theoretical Frame

"He who controls the media controls the mind of the public."

– Noam Chomski[15]

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[13] Daniel Sunter, "Disinformation in the Western Balcans", 2020. <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2020/12/21/disinformation-in-the-western-balkans/index.html?utm_medium=email> [2020 12 23]

[14] Ibid

[15] Noam Chomski, *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*, New York: Seven Stories Press, 1997, 28

To conduct the analysis of media discourse, Agenda setting, and Framing theory will be applied. It is a detail-oriented procedure which is thoroughly demonstrated further, in the research part. Agenda Setting Function was first put forth by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972 in Public Opinion Quarterly. They originally suggested that the media sets the public agenda, in the sense that they may not exactly tell you how to think, but they may tell you what to think about. "In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position. In reflecting what candidates are saying during a campaign, the mass media may well determine the important issues—that is, the media may set the 'agenda' of the campaign".[16]

For the analysis of the written materials, the technique of frame analysis by Erving Goffman is of great assist. Goffman raised framing theory in his book "*Frame Analysis, an Essay on the Organization of Experience*". Goffman claimed that individuals tend to construct a framework for every single kind of event. People frame experiences and on-going circumstances in a certain way and the ones which dominate are called primary frameworks.[17] The author introduced this specific phrase and pointed out that primary frameworks let its users perceive and locate their claims in the plots. The author further indicated that the social frameworks provide understandings for the events or requests stated by the actors, along with demonstrating the ways, applied to describe those events. Framing refers to the process by which people are able to develop a specific conceptualization of a certain issue or at least reorient their thinking about the same issue.[18]

Moreover, Goffman stated, that there are two distinctions with primary frameworks: one is the natural occurrence of the reality, "Natural frameworks identify occurrences seen as undirected, un-oriented, unanimated, unguided, purely physical".[19] Another is the socially driven occurrence, due to the whims, goals and manipulations on the part of other social players. The perception of reality can be framed and guided. "When the sun comes up, a natural event; when the blind is

[16] Maxwell McCombs, "The Agenda-Setting Role of the Mass Media in the Shaping of Public Opinion", Public *Opinion Quarterly,* 36(2), SUMMER 1972, 176–187

[17] Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience.* Boston*:* Northern University Press, 1986, 24

[18] Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, "Framing Theory", Illinois: Department of Political Science, Northwestern University, 2007, 103-104

[19] Goffman, 22

pulled down in order to avoid what has come up, a guided doing" – this "blind" metaphor vividly defines what "the frame" is.[20]

For the above-mentioned observations, Goffman's techniques were applied to identify the primary frameworks used in articles by Russian disinformative source, where they framed the image of NATO in various ways. All the main and most common frameworks were singled out after going through the entire raw material.

Jim A. Kuypers asserted "frames are so powerful because they induce us to filter our perceptions of the world in particular ways, essentially making some aspects of our multidimensional reality more noticeable than other aspects. They operate by making some information more salient than other information; therefore, they 'highlight some features of reality while omitting others.[21]

Media is very powerful to influence people's view on certain issues. Part of the strength of agenda-setting theory is that it affirms that the press strongly influences political decision-making; moreover, it clearly demonstrates that the media are especially influential in telling the general population what to think about. The media not only decide what the audience should think about (agenda-setting, but also lead them to think about the issue toward certain orientation. The great power of media to sway opinion was for example demonstrated in the research conducted by Thomas E. Nelson, Rosalee A. Clawson, and Zoe M. Oxley. They presented participants differently framed stories of a same incident and found that the participant's' opinion about the incident were subject to the influence of the frame they were presented.[22]

Although the journalism ethics require reporters to clearly distinguish between fact and opinion, be objective, fair and truthful in order to keep the news as a true image of the reality, it is very impossible to be put into practice, because no-one could see the "reality" without his own perspective, that is, the reality is "constructed". And the reporters, as social individuals, might shape frame based on his background, culture and various factors. Entman answered the question "What components in a news story constitutes a frame? By suggesting that frames in the news can be examined and identified by "the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments."

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[20] Goffman, 24

[21] Jim A. Kuypers, *Rhetorical Criticism, Perspectives in Action,* Plymouth, 2009,181

[22] Kuypers, *Rhetorical Criticism, Perspectives in Action,* 182-190

Methodology – Qualitative Media Content Analysis

After describing theory as such, a method for identifying frames in communication and a psychological model for understanding how such frames affect public opinion can be articulated as well. Framing is in many ways tied very closely to Agenda Setting theory. Both focus on how media draws the public's eye to specific topics – in this way they set the agenda. But Framing takes this a step further in the way in which the news is presented creates a frame for that information. This is usually a conscious choice by journalists – in this case a frame refers to the way media as gatekeepers organize and present the ideas, events, and topics they cover. There are a number of procedures used by qualitative researchers to analyze their data. According to the study of 'Three Approaches to Content Analysis', content analysis is a widely used qualitative research technique, aimed to compile and analyze a variety of scholarly research. This includes academic and professional journals, think tank publications, military doctrines, case studies produced by a myriad of sources, including government, nongovernmental, and international sources, and contemporary media reports. What is important, this study appreciates both qualitative and quantitative secondary data and evaluates such information accordingly to answer the research questions and aiming at achieving the objectives of this study. So even though the name highlights "qualitative" it actually somewhat merges both quantity and quality in one piece.

In contrast to other qualitive research methods, qualitative content analysis is not linked to any particular science, and there are fewer rules to follow. There are no specific conceptions of meaning, and the concepts used are universal. So, it is a huge advantage and a huge obstacle at the very same time, as it provides way more freedom to act accordingly to the aim of one's analysis, yet it is so much easier to get too far away from one's initial idea. Quantitative content analysis has its origin in media research, while qualitative content analysis has its roots originally in social research. Facts from the text are presented in the form of frequency expressed as a percentage or actual numbers of key categories. Within this particular methodology, it is common that data are based on 1 to 30 informants. However, the sample size should be determined on the basis of informational needs so that the research question could be answered with sufficient confidence.

Berelson was the first compilation of the various methods and aims of quantitative content analysis which had been developed at the time.[23] Kracauer, however, was critical of Berelson's book. Kracauer asserted that the quantitative nature disregarded the unique quality of texts and that it was crucial to reconstruct contexts. Kracauer further argued that it is not by tallying and

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[23] Bernard Berelson, Content Analysis in Communication Research. Michigan: Free Press, 1952

measuring that "patterns" or "wholes" in texts can be demonstrated. Rather, he argued that this was accomplished by showing the different possibilities of interpretation of "multiple connotations".[24]

Qualitative content analysis seeks to conserve the benefits of quantitative content analysis, whilst simultaneously employing a more qualitative interpretation. Mayring emphasizes certain key points, such as: fitting the material into a model of communication; systematic, rule-based analysis (the material is to be examined step by step, following rules of procedure, developing the material into content analytical units); inclusion of quantitative steps of analysis.[25]

Chosen methodology consists of 4 interdependent phases that should be covered throughout the process. The planning discussion begins by establishing the aim, which determines the structure of the study design and sets its boundaries, focuses on identifying an appropriate research question derived from review of available literature. Collection phase of such research consists of cataloguing existing research in a logical sequence to answer the subsidiary and primary research questions. Analysis phase occurs throughout the entire project, as the qualitative nature of the analysis begins during the plan phase and continues as the catalogue of sources grows, and the research questions develop and evolve. The process is primarily inductive, as the project inherently assumed that solutions to the problems posed by Russian information warfare exist. The researcher focused on deriving policy solutions by narrowing the research questions to an appropriate scope and level of detail. The sharing phase of the research conforms to the final conclusions and public presentation of the results.

Holsti[26] differentiated fifteen uses of content analysis and divided them into main categories:

1) make inferences about the antecedents of a communication.

2) describe and make inferences about characteristics of a communication.

3) make inferences about the effects of a communication.

The following table tangibly displays the fifteen uses of content analysis as described by Holsti.

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[24] Siegfried Kracauer , "The Challenge of Qualitative Content Analysis", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 16 (4), 1952, 631–642,

[25] Phylipp Mayring, *Qualitative Content Analysis: Theoretical Foundation,* Basic Procedures and Software Solution: Klagenfurt, 2003, 42-46

[26] Ole Holsti, R. Content analysis for the social sciences and humanities. Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co, 1969

Category	Question	Use
Make inferences about the antecedents of a communication	Who? Why?	• Answer questions of disputed authorship • Secure political & military intelligence • Analyze traits of individuals • Infer cultural aspects & change • Provide legal & evaluative evidence
Describe and make inferences about characteristics of a communication	How? What? To whom?	• Analyze techniques of persuasion • Analyze style • Describe trends in communication content • Relate known characteristics of sources to messages they produce • Compare communication content to standards • Relate known characteristics of audiences to messages produced for them • Describe patterns of communication

Make inferences about the effects of a communication	With what effect?	- Measure readability - Analyze the flow of information - Assess responses to communications

Table 1. Uses of Content Analysis.

Holsti's research on the fifteen uses of content analysis clearly displays the degree of its use with regards to this research. The use of qualitative content media analysis in this research will allow for the analysis of Russian disinformation efforts in the Baltic States, particularly with regards to analyzing techniques of persuasion and communication and subsequently make interpretations regarding the consequences of said Russian disinformation efforts.

Analysis Design

Why NATO?

Analysis of particularly NATO image constructed in Russian media was not chosen accidentally. To begin with, all public Russian security documents explicitly single out the challenges supposedly created by the policies of Western states for Russian security, particularly highlighting harsh words towards the Security strategy. Grievances connected to what Russia sees as 'systemic problems in the Euro-Atlantic region' (Foreign policy concept), the enlargement of NATO, the location of its military infrastructure close to Russian borders, its 'offensive capabilities' and the trend towards the Alliance acquiring 'global functions', the 'symptoms' of the U.S. efforts to retain absolute military supremacy.[27] NATO is being presented as highly hostile organization and, as the Kremlin sees it, is constantly striving to undermine Russia's great power, international status and security interests.

As for all the Europeans and the whole western flank, organization of NATO has always been understood and taken as steadfast, promising and unifying international unit. Considering that NATO is the world's most important military alliance, the question of its strong identity, logically, should not even be ever raised. But in reality, the case is a bit different – its international identity is being consistently and uninterruptedly challenged. Opposing powers with Russia in the front always

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[27] Directorate-General For External Policies Policy Department, "Russia's national security strategy and military doctrine and their implications for the EU", Belgium, 2017, 9-10

nourished a hugely different view. According to political scientist Janusz Bugajski, Moscow's disinformation seeks to popularize false images of NATO in the West, picturing it as an imperialist predator imposing its will on subservient states.[28]

Russia's national security documents emphasize Western criticism of Russian policies in the post-Soviet space, often even describing them as neo-imperialistic. Meanwhile, Kremlin considers that NATO and the EU have expanded their own spheres of influence through their enlargement and the development of wide networks of cooperative ties, including in the neighborhood they share with Russia.[29] Not surprisingly, capabilities of military tools, are of major importance for Russia. Although, the bulk of the Russian military, relying on conscription and greatly uneven levels of modern equipment, does not offer Russia the operational capabilities that would allow to cover the quite extensive and multifaceted threat assessment. Various details make it difficult for Russia to contemplate catching up with NATO quantitatively, qualitatively, technologically: Russian conventional military power continues and, supposingly will continue to slightly lag behind the United States and, most importantly inside thesis boundaries, NATO in terms of different sizes – of resources, of spending, of personnel – and, of course, technological level.[30]

Despite the above-mentioned differences considering Russia's and NATO militaristic capabilities, non-military instruments too seem to play an increasingly prominent role within this confrontation. NATO is concerned that Russia could resort more frequently to the complex combination of different tactics and tools it used quite recently, in 2014, in Crimea and Donbas. Primarily military tools were used but they were thoughtfully combined with consistent cyber-attacks, creation of political and economic pressure, and intensive disinformation campaigns. The latter one, without questioning its great importance, becomes the central point of the whole thesis. The clash between two great powers, Russia and NATO, is too important and too permanent, not to be review through the lens of modern, digital instruments and Russia's capabilities targeted against NATO solely within the field of disinformation.

Why *Russia Today*?

Russia has been working on its disinformation campaign continuously for many years. Using global network of news sites in different languages to push anti-West narratives, sow

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[28] Janusz Bugajski, "Why Does Moscow View NATO as a Threat?", 2019. <https://cepa.org/moscows-anti-nato-deception/> [2020 03 01]

[29] Ibid, 9

[30] Directorate-General for External Policies Policy Department, "Russia's national security strategy and military doctrine and their implications for the EU", 15-16

conspiracy theories to cast doubt on traditional media outlets and foment controversy to boost Russia's presence on the global stage.[31] For a fluent analysis of disinformative campaign, one particular source of a kind was designated - *Russia Today*. The Russian news agency *Russia Today*, also known as RT, is a state-controlled international television network that has been recognized as disinformative source of news numerous of times. It is funded by the Russian federal tax budget, broadcasting in Russian and in English in several countries, as well as providing Internet content in various languages, such as Arabic, Spanish, Deutsch and several others.[32] Strong doubts about its partiality existed since the very start of the project all the way back in 2005. News agency has been called "Kremlin-tied"[33], "information weapon", blamed for "conducting the information war" and even registered as a "foreign agent" in the United States.[34] In Kremlin Watch Report, RT has been introduced as "the official 'face' of the Kremlin's disinformation campaign in Europe and the United States".[35] What must be emphasized for the context of this analysis, in the very same report, RT is highly characterized as anti-NATO[36] news agency, which adds a fair amount of validity to research. With such strong international stance and all the evidence towards RT activity, an analysis of its articles presented for English-speaking audience is an interesting and necessary work. If the whole news agency is being taken as pro-Kremlin and spreading disinformation, therefore, its smaller parts, such as articles that will be the core material for the following analysis, can also be presumed to be a disinformative content.

Considering various sources, absolute majority of the articles and books found were concentrating on the measures that either the Russians are using towards particular countries, or the ones that those particular countries should respond with. Nevertheless, many of the articles take Russian propaganda as a matter of course, without doubting its existence. Only a very few of them concentrates on the essence of the message they are intending to share. As with the analysis of

31 Mark Scott, "Inside Russia's state-media propaganda machine". *Politico,* 2020 <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-propaganda-disinformation-rt/> [2020 10 15]

32 Max Fisher, "In case you weren't clear on Russia Today's relationship to Moscow, Putin clears it up". *The Washington Post,* 2013. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/06/13/in-case-you-werent-clear-on-russia-todays-relationship-to-moscow-putin-clears-it-up/> [2020 04 15]

33 Lucy Martirosyan, "Baltic ban on Kremlin-tied RT step toward dismantling 'machinery of disinformation,' says media expert", 2020. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2020-07-10/baltic-ban-kremlin-tied-rt-step-toward-dismantling-machinery-disinformation-says> [2020 06 20]

34 Ben Nimmo, "Question That: RT's Military Mission", <https://medium.com/dfrlab/question-that-rts-military-mission-4c4bd9f72c88> [2020 06 14]

35 Monika L. Richter, "What We Know about RT (Russia Today)", Czech Republic, 2017. <https://www.europeanvalues.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/What-We-Know-about-RT-Russia-Today-1.pdf>

36 Ibid

Russia Today, the international acknowledgment as disinformative source of news, brings forth an opportunity to concentrate solely on the internationally constructed image of NATO, not misspending time to question its bias. As there are loads of articles within this topic, some characteristics must be applied, to narrow the scope. Main features that have been selected for an article to correspond with are threefold: it needs to be written in English, needs to be targeted at least one of three Baltic countries and mentioning either of them, and finally – a keyword "NATO" must be included in it.

Time Limitations

It is hardly deniable that joining NATO was a huge and meaningful step for Lithuania together-with other Baltic countries. After all three countries had restored their independence, becoming part of NATO alliance was a fundamental part of a major strategic goal – integration with Western Europe. It not only strengthened international positions of relatively small countries and highly increased their security, but also made a strong statement for all the surrounding, less-friendly countries – from then on, they have become an integral part of a strong force. Even though the Baltic nations applied for membership in NATO almost 20 years ago, back in 2002, and became full-fledged members back in 2004, there were other important dates in the history of collaboration between NATO and the Baltic countries. One of them is the following and will proceed greatly as an important timestamp of the analysis. In July 2016, when the NATO summit was taking a place in Warsaw, a decision was made to reinforce the defensive capabilities of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland by establishing the NATO-mission "enhanced Forward Presence" (further – eFP). eFP consists of multinational reinforced battalions, so called Battlegroups (further – BG), one of which has been deployed within all the respective states since the following year after the decision was made, in 2017. Each BGs personnel strength has been between 1.000 and 1.250 soldiers.[37] NATO has enhanced its presence in the eastern part of the Alliance, with four multinational battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. These battlegroups, led by the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany and the United States respectively, have been multinational, and combat-ready, demonstrating the strength of the transatlantic bond. Their presence ensured NATO's motto and made really clear that an attack on one Ally would be considered as an attack on the whole Alliance.[38] NATO's battlegroups formed part of the biggest reinforcement of NATO's collective defense in a generation.

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[37] NATO Communications Staff Element, "Enhanced Forward Presence Battlegroup Lithuania", 2019

[38] NATO, Collective defense - Article 5, 2019 <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm,> [2020 05 30]

Taking the date of NATO deployment of four multinational BGs, together with all the above-mentioned facts, as of great importance, it becomes a major timestamp of the analysis. Year of 2017 is being taken as the inter-medial point of the whole analysis interval. To be as accurate as possible, approximately same time periods are being taken in both directions from the date fixed date – two years backwards (2015) and two years forward (2019). Year 2020 is being distracted out of the field of research, due to inability to fully cover the year, as the data gathering for analysis was started and lasted throughout the same year. Thus, any other date for the starting point of analysis time interval, would distort the proportions of time periods,

Such wide time boundaries creating an interval of 5 years, provides not only a plenty of material to examine, but also ensures a fair amount of validity for the analysis and its results that follow. Just as well, such choices create a perfect opportunity to see what, if any, difference in the quantity, frames used and aggressiveness of disinformation can be seen before and after the deployment of NATO battlegroups.

Prepositions to be Tested

Reconsidering all of the above mentioned information, **two prepositions arise that will be tested** throughout the analysis. First, that there should be **a change of frames** when comparing time periods before and after the deployment of NATO battlegroups in the Baltic States. Second, that together with the change of frames, the **tone of messages towards NATO should change** as well.

Sample Selection

All of the articles within the 5-year time scope were reviewed, already mentioned characteristics (English language, targeting the Baltic states, keyword "NATO") were applied and the ones, that corresponded to the research objective were chosen for the in-depth analysis. Further information concerning the whole list covering all the articles within the specter of analysis, listed month by month, is presented in the **Appendix 1**.

What is important to emphasize, that articles, in order to be taken into deep analysis and reconsideration within this thesis, had not only just contain necessary key words, but also expand on them as central ones, necessary to unfold one's meaning. Just mentioning "NATO" or any of three Baltic States in the context of totally unrelated to Alliance and its characteristics material, was not considered as valid data within the frames of research of NATO image construct. Moreover, doing on the contrary and including data from such articles, could have distort the final results and make the whole analysis not as well founded as it is now.

In order to go through large number of materials and answer the stated researched questions, frame and thematic analyses were used. Framing analysis showed the way each article particularly presented NATO identification; thematic analysis helped sorting out the main arguments behind the image's construction. The research is mainly qualitative as it is focused on the in-depth study of the arguments, however it does use the elements of quantitative analysis as well. To start with the latter one, overall, the available number of articles in English (excluding the deleted, no longer available *online* or articles, which are not accessible for regular civilians and the media representatives) made by the pro-Russian media network equaled 115.

One of the main difficulties throughout the process of analysis was choosing the concrete articles. Due to the fact that the timeframe of the research interest is quite wide and covers even 5 years, that is a huge amount of time for propagandist messages to spread. Therefore, not only it took loads of time to conclude an analysis itself, but also, some changes followed through. As mentioned above, efforts were made to ensure the validity. Consequently, as a few articles that have been analyzed, although were written in English, included necessary keywords, etc., it did not send out any relevant messages to public, and the keywords were only mentioned in the context, without any major reasoning or essence. The final number of the articles taken into analysis is 108.

Concluding the most important aspects of necessary data collection, due to a relatively easy access to the necessary information provided online, the research material gathering process, although closely targeting other countries and an international organization, took place only in Vilnius, Lithuania.

Data Analysis

Having all of the necessary data taken out, analysis of collected information can be executed. First of all, some general technical insights should be mentioned. Distribution of articles throughout the 5-year long period is visible below (**see Charts 1 and 2**).
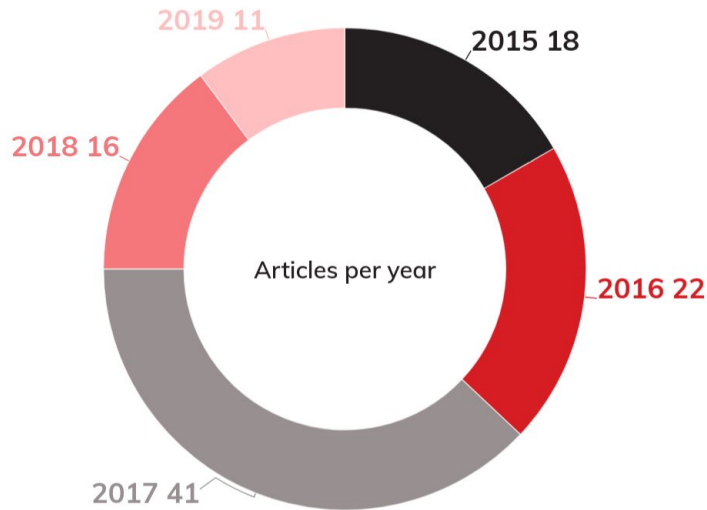
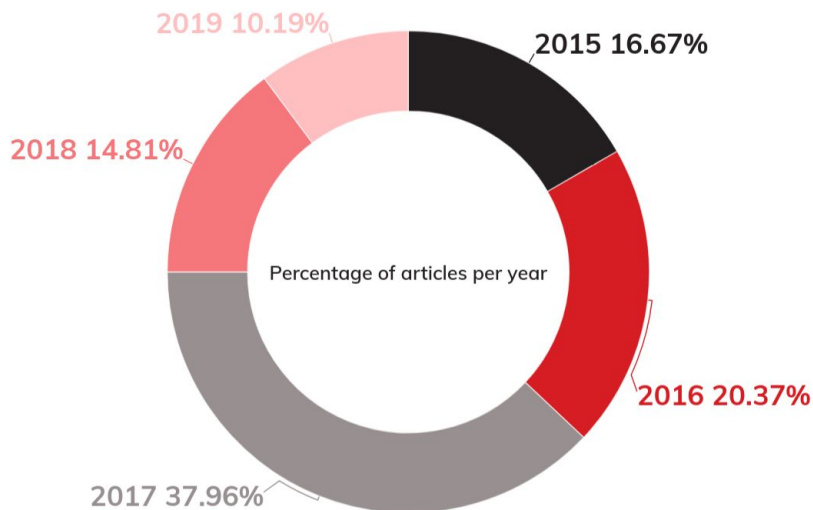**Chart 1. Number of articles found per year**

Chart 2. Percentage of articles found per year

Chart reveals that 2017, year of battlegroups deployment, was the most active in publishing articles, resulting 41 articles published per year. It equals almost 3 and a half articles per month on *rt.com*   website related to NATO and considering the Baltic states. Having in mind the incredible variety of possible different topics, such number is considerably high and proves the importance of NATO thematic and the level of attention Russian source dedicates to the topic. Another insight, which can be found a bit surprising, that the number of articles was seemingly higher before rather than after the battlegroups deployment in the Baltics (**see Charts 3 and 4**).
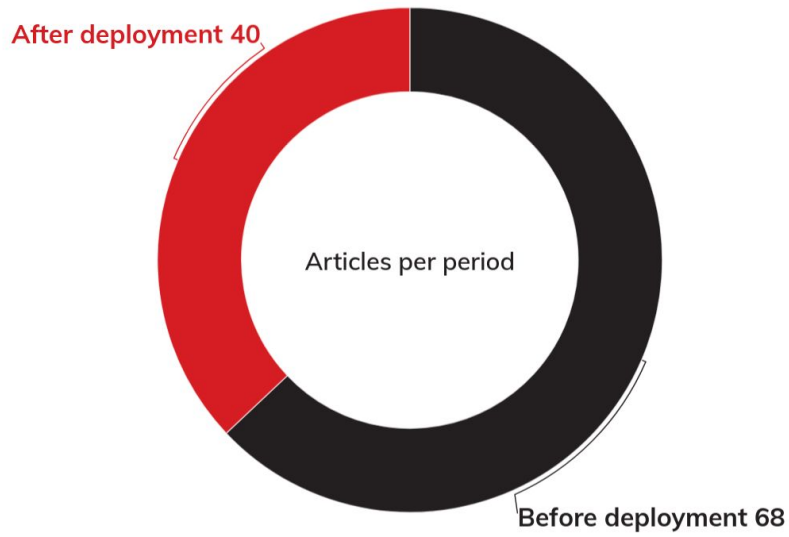
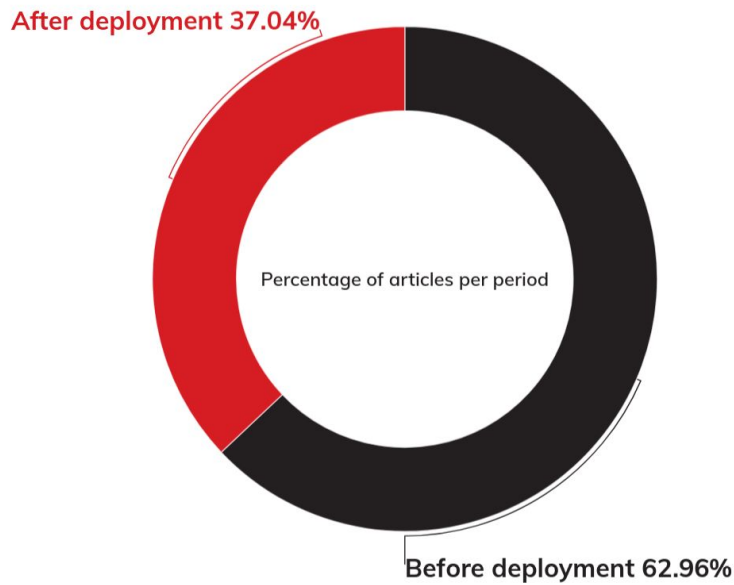**Chart 3. Number of articles found per period**

Chart 4. Percentage of articles found per period

Charts show that more than 60 percent of all articles within 5 years were published before the battlegroups have deployed in the Baltic countries.   Therefore, supposedly, the ensuring animosity towards NATO before it deployed its battlegroups and instigating pro-Kremlin citizens to act on it seemed more important for Russia than to agitate against them, once the battlegroups have already been deployed. It could also be interpreted, that the harsh agitation before the deployment was taken into action while willing to stop or at least postpone the anticipated implementation.

After summarizing the sources, a slight difference between the countries mentioned/included into the articles was noticed (**see Chart 5**).
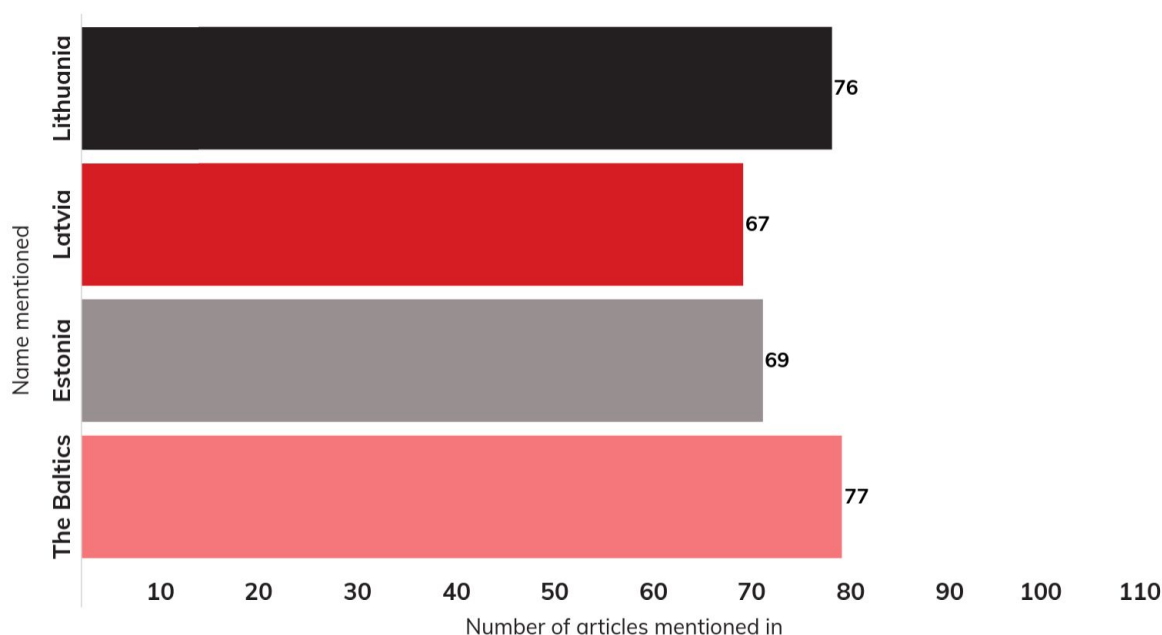

Chart 5. Number of articles countries were mentioned in

As it might have been foreseeable, the highest number of articles considered "The Baltics", as all three countries in one, as they have been found in 77 articles out of 108. Separate countries were mentioned less times, but the difference hardly considerable – "Lithuania" in 76 articles, "Latvia" in 67 and "Estonia" in 69. Taking in account the following information, an interesting finding was that these stats inversely correlate with the numbers of ethnic Russians constantly living in the three countries, according to the latest data publicly available online. As there is the lowest percentage of ethnic Russians living in Lithuania (5.8% of all citizens in Lithuania)[39] out of three Baltic countries, number of mentions specifically in English articles (76) is the highest. Opposite is with Latvian case, where the most Russians are located (25.4% of all citizens in Latvia)[40] and the lowest number of mentions specifically in English sources (67) is visible. Presumably, mentions of Latvia could be higher in articles written in Russian language, to properly fit the audience of interest. Estonia takes the middle position both in mentions (69) and in the

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[39] Lietuvos Satistikos Departamentas, "GYVENTOJAI PAGAL TAUTYBĘ, GIMTĄJĄ KALBĄ IR TIKYBĄ", Lietuvos gyventojų ir būstų surašymas: Vilnius, 2013. <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/documents/10180/217110/Gyv_kalba_tikyba.pdf/1d9dac9a-3d45-4798-93f5-941fed00503f> [2020 11 01]

[40] Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, "In 2017, usually resident population of Latvia declined by 15.7 thousand", Rīga, Latvia, 2019. <https://www.csb.gov.lv/en/statistics/statistics-by-theme/population/number-and-change/search-in-theme/2402-number-population-latvia-2017> [2020 11 01]

percentage of Russian citizens (24% of total citizens in Estonia).[41] The difference between Latvia and Estonia in both measurements is extremely small, while Lithuania comes out in great contrast, both in percentage of ethnic Russians in the country and, therefore, the mentions in English articles.

Frames Found

After overviewing technical statistics from the articles, the analysis can move towards its main goal – disclosing frames, used for framing NATO in *Russia Today*, within the Baltic states. To conduct the analysis as fluently as possible, the same, already mentioned timestamp of NATO battlegroups deployment in the Baltic countries, will be used to divide frames, purified from the articles, into two groups: the ones, found in the articles before the implementation and the ones, from the articles after. In such way, the difference – if any – in framing tactics could be examined, while comparing two periods.

Before the Deployment of NATO Battlegroups in the Baltics

After carefully analyzing 68 articles found on *Russia Today* before the deployments, a few main frames were found and most of the articles fell under the same frames. Main generalized frames are listed below and substantiated further:

1. Major threat to Russia;

2. Russophobic organization;

3. Conflict initiator;

4. Unreasonably judgmental towards Russia;

5. Undermining national/regional security;

6. Using Crimea events as an excuse for expansion.

Overviewing the sources that fit the selected frames, numerous citations can be taken into account. First of all, frame that occurred for absolutely most of times was presenting NATO as "a major threat to Russia". *Russia Today* presented Russian stance that the country "has long criticized NATO's military buildup, calling it a threat to its national security and stability in Europe".[42] The very same military buildup was stated to be "carried out "under the false pretext of alleged 'aggressive behavior' by our country" and has been accompanied by "unfriendly and malicious"

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[41]   Katja Koort,. "The Russians of Estonia: Twenty Years After", Tallinn, 2014. <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/russians-estonia-twenty-years-after> [2020 11 01]

[42] Russia Today, "Lithuania aims to spend $115m on air-defense system amid NATO build-up in Eastern Europe", 2016. <https://www.rt.com/news/360854-lithuania-nato-defense-system/> [2020 10 30]

rhetoric",[43] Kremlin press secretary Dmitry Peskov concluded whole NATO topic shortly: "We see this [military buildup] as a threat. These actions pose a threat to our interests and security".[44] NATO has also been introduced as a "truly aggressive block"[45], that "ramps up was rhetoric"[46] and constantly keeps on "changing the very essence of the military security in the regions which are adjacent to the Russian border".[47]

To emphasize the enmity against NATO even more, website has repeatedly framed the organization as highly Russophobic, stating that NATO's perceptions of military threats are artificially created to justify "its anti-Russian stance with baseless accusations of security threats."[48] During the analysis of articles, numerous blames for "hysterical Russophobia"[49] has been found, as pro-Kremlin website kept on constantly stating, that the Baltic countries are overwhelmed with prejudice, are ignoring real facts and cover themselves, as well as their aggressive actions, up with groundless fear of Russia. Hardly could anything better shortly summarize whole NATO Russophobic campaign, than a citation from *Russia Today* article: "<…> NATO is an anti-Russian military bloc that had been enlarging towards Russia's border and compromised its national security".[50]

Without being, as pro-Kremlin media sees it, anti-Russian, NATO is also presented to be the one instigating the whole tension between players and taking the role of conflict initiator. As already mentioned before, Russia is told to be strongly affected by the Alliance's military buildup and, therefore, is blaming NATO to be quickly returning to Cold War, with similar war-time posture, together with hundreds of thousands of troops based along the borders.[51] Furthermore,

43 Russia Today, "Abrams tanks and Bradley vehicles: US heavy military equipment arrive in Estonia", 2015. <https://www.rt.com/news/319651-us-military-equipment-estonia/> [2020 10 30]

44 Russia Today, "US tanks and soldiers in Poland pose threat to Russia – Kremlin", 2017. <https://www.rt.com/news/373492-peskov-kremlin-usa-tanks/> [2020 10 29]

45 Russia Today, "Lithuania confirms presence of US special forces as a 'deterrence against Russian aggression", 2017. <https://www.rt.com/news/372602-lithuania-us-special-forces/> [2020 10 29]

46 Russia Today, "Unfounded claims? NATO 'categorically rejects' it threatens Russia", 2016. <https://www.rt.com/news/328000-nato-denies-threat-russia/> [2020 10 31]

47Russia Today, "US to ship 1,600 tanks to Dutch arms depot in 'clear message' to Russia", 2016. <https://www.rt.com/news/370575-us-tanks-holland-nato-russia/> [2020 10 30]

48 Russia Today, "US F-35 fighters arrive in Estonia amid NATO buildup", 2017. <https://www.rt.com/news/386101-us-f35-arrive-estonia/> [2020 10 31]

49 Russia Today, "Lithuanian town raided by rebels in surprise 'Russian invasion' drill", 2017. <https://www.rt.com/news/384551-lithuania-surprise-invasion-drill/> [2020 10 29]

50 Russia Today, "US armor paraded 300m from Russian border (VIDEO)", 2015. <https://www.rt.com/news/235311-estonia-border-military-parade/> [2020 10 28]

51 Russia Today, 'Focus on Baltic region': UK bolsters anti-Russian NATO taskforce with 5 warships, troops, 2016. <https://www.rt.com/news/331991-uk-warships-nato-russia/> [2020 10 30]

NATO has been accused of trying to annex Kaliningrad, Russia's westernmost city, sandwiched between Poland and Lithuania, which separates it from mainland Russia.[52] Even though the accusations were false, they still managed to make it to *Russia Today* headings and thus, add up to NATO conflict initiator's role. Finally, Allience was told to possess true eagerness to go to war, when so many times, "diplomacy is the answer"[53], that Russia declares to be seeking for and, contrary to NATO, trying to ease the prevalent tension.

Another frequently occurring idea on pro-Kremlin media source was that NATO is acting unreasonably while acting highly judgmental towards Russia. Throughout the articles, it has been denied tens of times, that Russia has no aggressive intentions against NATO members[54] as well as said, that the Alliance is using its groundless accusations as a pretext to compromise Russia's national security. Article after article, NATO statements about the potential threat that Russia causes to the Alliance and its members, were scare quoted[55] and placed into quotation marks to indicate author's skepticism, emphasize the irony and improbability of the matter. Such examples could be: "to counter the Russian 'threat"[56], 'potential invasion from Russia'[57], or "against potential Russian 'aggression".[58] Most of such phrases were followed with statements of denial, to lessen their importance and prove their partiality from the Alliance's side.

In spite of only defending itself from accusations, Russia has also been counterattacking NATO, repeatedly stating that the Alliance is the main factor undermining both Russia's national, as well as Europe's regional security. Such affirmations were straightforward and published frequently. Pro-Kremlin media repeatedly called *the* Alliance's moves aggressive, while stressing that they are undermining security in the whole Europe.[59] Even president of Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin,

52 Russia Today, Lithuania army website hack hoax reveals 'NATO plans to annex Russia's Kaliningrad', 2015. <rt.com/news/266551-lithuania-kaliningrad-annexation-nato/> [2020 10 28]

53 Russia Today, "The Warsaw Pact is dead, so why is NATO still alive?", 2015. <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/324840-warsaw-pact-nato-us/> [2020 10 31]

54 Russia Today, "Germany begins tank deployment to Lithuania as part of NATO commitment to Baltics", 2017. <https://www.rt.com/news/375815-germany-tanks-deployment-lithuania/> [2020 10 31]

55 University of Chicago Press staff, *Chicago Manual of Style*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2010, 365-366

56 Russia Today, "Polish MoD wants to see Warsaw packed with weapons to counter 'Russia threat", 2017. <https://www.rt.com/news/374202-poland-nato-us-troops/> [2020 10 28]

57 Russia Today, "Dress warm, pack condoms, hide: Lithuania writes guerilla manual for Russian invasion", 2016. <https://www.rt.com/viral/364622-lithuania-russian-invasion-manual/> [2020 10 27]

58 Russia Today, "US tanks, infantry fighting vehicles arrive in Estonia amid NATO buildup on Russian borders", 2017. <https://www.rt.com/news/376513-us-tanks-arrive-estonia/> [2020 10 30]

59 Russia Today, "'We'll supply bricks,' Russia tells Lithuania on plans to build 'anti-aggressor' fence at border", 2017. <https://www.rt.com/news/373829-lithuania-russia-wall-brick/> [2020 10 31]

was quoted concerning NATO moves, accusing it of meddling in Russian affairs and constantly trying to provoke a conflict.[60] "They are provoking us constantly and are trying to draw us into confrontation" – the Russian leader claimed several time, adding that NATO members are continuing their attempts to "interfere in our internal affairs in a bid to destabilize the social and political situation in Russia itself."[61] NATO, allegedly rising tensions throughout the region and Russia, was claimed to be repeatedly warned about its growing expansion, yet ignoring the warnings and keep on provoking the conflicts on different levels.

Last frame, frequently seen throughout the articles issued before the battlegroups deployment in the Baltics, was NATO justifying its moves with events in Crimea. *Russia Today* claimed, that the Alliance seized the chance to hugely build up its military presence, while covering itself up with Russia's reunification with Crimea,[62] and falsely raising groundless fears of being attacked by Russia. No surprise, that the reunification was widely presented as a legal act, claiming that Crimea subsequently voted in a public referendum to voluntarily rejoin Russia. Pro-Kremlin media accused NATO of falsely justifying its military existence by playing the old Russia "scaremongering card" and using the intense political crisis in Ukraine for its own favor.[63] After annexing Crimea, Russia seemed to manage to present it as a noble act, that, on contrary, NATO did not hesitate to cold-heartedly take an advantage of.

After the deployment of NATO battlegroups in the Baltics

After thoroughly examining remaining 40 articles, other reoccurring frames, considerably different from the analyzed above, were found. The ones that repeated for the most times are listed below and substantiated further:

7. Ill-prepared and under-equipped;

8. US driven and oppressed;

9. Disrespectful/wrongdoers;

10. Hostile organization;

11. Unpredictable/unforeseeable;

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[60] Russia Today, "Putin: NATO keeps trying to draw Russia into confrontation, meddle in internal affairs", 2016. <https://www.rt.com/news/377538-nato-russia-confrontation-meddling/> [2020 10 25]

[61] Ibid

[62] Russia Today, "Airborne troops, Mi-28s & fleet: Massive military drills kick off in Crimea (VIDEO)", 2017. <https://www.rt.com/news/381566-crimea-massive-military-drills/> [2020 10 27]

[63] Russia Today, "Russia to form 3 new divisions to counter NATO buildup", 2016. <https://www.rt.com/news/341756-russia-divisions-nato-threat/> [2020 10 29]

12. Distorting history and facts/lying.

Resuming the analysis of frames detected, section of frames found after the deployment is opened with NATO technical evaluation by pro-Kremlin media: specifically, levels of its equipment and preparation. After NATO has settled its battlegroups across the Baltics, *Russia Today* did not take long to start criticizing its presence. This topic has started with RT proudly reporting an "equipment gap",[64] as NATO troops were reported to constantly lack bulletproof vests, winter-time uniforms and to be generally ill-prepared[65] for oversees mission, during NATO drills in Norway. NATO member states were terribly undervalued, as well as told to have appalling navies that suffer from "legacy concepts" and cannot do much against Russia.[66] The very same incident has been repeated in several articles, adding that is has been "super embarrassing", doubting whether the soldiers would be able to buy the right clothes on their own[67] and concluded with an emphasized note, that it was NATO that failed to decently prepare troops for cold Norwegian weather[68] and take a proper care of them.

After the deployment, pro-Kremlin media tried hard to question the very roots of NATO Alliance and used good old anti-American card, while repeating that bloc is solely driven by the United States of America and strongly oppressing other member states. Such catchy expressions as "owing to US overlord",[69] "pressured by the US <…> to increase their military budgets",[70] "free riding on the massive US military apparatus",[71] were repeatedly creating the huge power contrast, putting United States on a pedestal, while the rest of NATO members were well behind them. Moreover, other countries were pictured suffering constant and heavy criticism from US,[72] as they

[64] Russia Today, "German army exposed as lacking basic equipment for NATO missions – report:, 2018. <https://www.rt.com/news/419225-german-army-shortage-uniform/> [2020 10 28]

[65] Ibid

[66] Russia Today, "US Navy expert laments 'Slav' incompetence of new NATO navies in scary Russia essay", 2019. <https://www.rt.com/usa/466599-nato-navy-russia-reforms/> [2020 10 27]

[67] Russia Today, "Cooold War: Dutch troops have to buy winter underwear on their own ahead of major NATO drill", 2018. <https://www.rt.com/news/439662-dutch-troops-lack-underwear/> [2020 10 30]

[68] Russia Today, "Now this is transparency! NATO to deploy 45,000 troops near Russian border, calls it 'defensive'", 2018. <https://www.rt.com/news/440443-nato-trident-juncture-russia-aggression/> [2020 10 29]

[69] Russia Today, "NATO virus is spreading, aggressive & immune to any antibiotic of logic", 2018/ <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/428911-nato-virus-europe-russia/> [2020 10 30]

[70] Russia Today, "'Pen & mic warriors' stoke fears over Russian war games to justify NATO presence – Moscow", 2017. <https://www.rt.com/news/400986-zapad-russia-belarus-nato/> [2020 10 28]

[71] Russia Today, "NATO all about values, but pay up! Pentagon boss reprimands US allies – or should that be vassals?", 2019. <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/475871-nato-values-esper-pentagon-spending/> [2020 10 31]

[72] Russia Today, "Germany 'committed' to increasing defense budget, but nowhere near US expectations", 2019. <https://www.rt.com/news/454202-germany-defense-budget-nato/> [2020 10 31]

would expect bigger contributions from the rest of the member countries. Submissiveness to US was frequently broadcasted throughout the articles, to constantly remind the audience, who is actually standing behind this whole evil Alliance project.

While mentioning "evil" Alliance, it has actually been framed as a highly disrespectful bloc fully functioning by wrongdoers. All of the unfortunate or embarrassing incidents, even the slightest of them, that occurred during the time of NATO battlegroups presence in various countries, were manifested, hugely overestimated and made it to headlines. For example, such event as two NATO soldiers were, ostensibly, reported to be caught peeing on the landmark Freedom Monument in Riga.[73] Another one that could be mentioned, is that a NATO Hummer reportedly has crashed into a car carrying four female students in Lithuania, sending three of them to hospital.[74] Another accident related to vehicle crashes, was reported a few months later, when over a dozen troopers were injured after two armored vehicles smashed into each other, again in Lithuania, while going to the annual NATO exercise.[75] Moreover, different incidents that include fighter jets in NATO training missions were reported, as during one of them, air-to-air missile was accidentally fired[76] and an American serviceman has been killed[77] in another. Without being as tragic as they are, all of the depicted incidents were complete accidental. Despite that, on *Russia Today* website, they became central news, used to prove how service in NATO troops can even be deadly and what a horrible experience NATO presence in one's country might be.

Solitary unfortunate instances perfectly add up and consecutively lead to another created image of NATO on Kremlin-controlled media – picturing the Alliance as a highly hostile organization. *Russia Today* kept on questioning the very essence of NATO – collective and mutual defense – and introduced it as a cover up, while in reality, "far from being a defensive shield, [NATO and its partner organization] are an aggressive, ever wider broadsword.[78] Created and purposefully functioning to take up on Russia, NATO is being presented as a military alliance, using

[73] Russia Today, "Price of liberty: 'Sober' US soldiers fined $400 for urinating on Freedom Monument in Latvia", 2019. <https://www.rt.com/news/454024-freedom-monument-us-troops-latvia/> [2020 10 28]

[74] Russia Today, "Three injured as NATO SUV crashes into car carrying Lithuanian students", 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/393268-injured-nato-crash-lithuania/> [2020 10 30]

[75] Russia Today, "13 injured as 4 US armored vehicles collide on Lithuania road (PHOTOS)", 2018. <https://www.rt.com/usa/429080-lithuania-armored-vehicles-crash/> [2020 09 28]

[76] Russia Today, "Estonia struggles to find missile accidentally fired by NATO jet policing Russian border", 2018. <https://www.rt.com/news/435479-estonia-nato-patrol-missile/> [2020 10 15]

[77] Russia Today, "Cunning plan: Poland wants to set up a US military base right next to Russia's Kaliningrad", 2018. <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/445850-military-base-poland-russia-nato/?> [2020 10 22]

[78] Russia Today, "NATO virus is spreading, aggressive & immune to any antibiotic of logic", 2018. <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/428911-nato-virus-europe-russia/> [2020 11 01]

its defensive stance as "a pretext to conduct large-scale drills and increase its military presence on Russia's borders".[79] Russia has not only got considered about its national security and undermined stability, as Moscow noticed NATO quickly increasing its presence on Russia's doorstep,[80] but also got disturbed by a real threat to democratic control of foreign and defense policy in member countries, that NATO is stated to be constantly possessing.[81] Jeopardizing stability on different levels, North Atlantic Alliance is being pictured as fostering hostile plans, falsely justifying its military buildups while covering up by false noble reasoning, that is not being followed at all in practice.

While being framed as an aggressive organization, NATO faces yet another important characteristic connoting its hostility – it is being hardly predictable and unforeseeable. Sudden military buildups, unexpected trainings/missions, unfortunate accidents, etc. are not only giving some proper reasoning to Russia to raise this kind of problem to publicity, but, as always, let Kremlin interpret events as they may. For example, such warning as "a NATO buildup could lead to a surprise nuclear strike on Russia"[82] was published, causing a lot of negative reaction and even more growing distrust of the Alliance throughout the country. Of course, *Russia Today* works effortlessly to contribute to negative image formation. For example, instead of simply describing NATO annual trainings, Kremlin-controlled media better chose to turn them into a proper and sudden invasion, plus, pointed to the fact that it is diverged against Russia: "18,000 NATO soldiers just invaded the Baltic States and Poland for the eighth Saber Strike military maneuvers aimed at Russia".[83] The website has also mentioned NATO staging "dozens of war games" just like the fellow one, involving tens of thousands of troops and, to sound even more profoundly, has constantly been calling NATO actions provocative.[84] Adding a surprise factor to the whole NATO framing process, genuinely assists to create an immense rejective reaction across the targeted countries.

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79 Russia Today, "'Russians will die in Tallinn if they invade': Estonian commander launches bizarre rant", 2018. <https://www.rt.com/news/432682-estonian-commandos-threat-russians/> [2020 10 22]

80 Russia Today, "Cunning plan: Poland wants to set up a US military base right next to Russia's Kaliningrad"

81 Russia Today, "NATO virus is spreading, aggressive & immune to any antibiotic of logic"

82 Russia Today, "'Russia more active in Europe than during Cold War– ' top US & NATO officer", 2017. <https://www.rt.com/news/384196-russia-nato-naval-activity/> [2020 10 15]

83 Russia Today, "NATO virus is spreading, aggressive & immune to any antibiotic of logic

84 Russia Today, "Poland fires anti-air missiles as part of NATO Dragon 17 drills (VIDEO)", 2017. <https://www.rt.com/news/404822-poland-air-defense-drills/> [2020 11 02]

Last, but not least occurring depiction of NATO on pro-Kremlin media was about the history distortion, simple NATO lies and its ignorance of facts. One of the most popular stories of this case was Russian media reaction over a NATO published documentary, 'Forest Brothers'. According to Kremlin, it was created "featuring Nazi-collaborating guerrillas from the Baltic nations" and, following the documentary, the Russian foreign ministry has even pledged to hijack an online campaign by Lithuanian nationalists which targeted its Facebook page.[85] A call upon historians, reporters, and political scientists was made, encouraging not to remain indifferent to this "new attempt of distorting history",[86] even though the short 8-minute film was fully documentary, rejection form Russia's side could hardly count as surprising. Such blames for NATO as "outrageous distortion of history"[87] or "using all spheres of human activity such as politics, economics and even culture and sports to impose its anti-Russian agenda on as many people as possible"[88] were taken into action to take up a position of disadvantage and reveal, how unjust the behavior of the Alliance actually is. Ironically, Russia has also complained about being accused by NATO of spreading fake news and disinformation around the globe.[89] In such way, Russia is adding digital warfare as the final field that, apparently, NATO is using to distort the reality and take advantage of, while actually, it is pro-Kremlin media that is effortlessly trying to frame NATO as a mendacious Alliance.

Main Insights and Framing Methods Used

After analyzing all of the articles and frames found in them, a couple of insights should be emphasized. First of all, chosen year of 2017, when the NATO-mission "enhanced Forward Presence" has been established in the Baltic countries and Poland, proved to be correct as an important timestamp, marking changes not only in the intensity of publishing articles, but in the nature of frames found in them, as well. Methods used to create a more believable frame system remained more or less the same and are introduced below.

85 Russia Today, "Tug of tags: Moscow aims to hijack Lithuanian hashtag campaign in spat over Nazi collaborators", 2017. <https://www.rt.com/news/396742-fm-forest-brothers-social-media/> [2020 10 26]

86 Russia Today, "'Perversion of history': Russian officials blast NATO film glorifying Nazi collaborators", 2017. <https://www.rt.com/russia/396208-historical-perversion-russian-officials-blast/> [2020 11 03]

87 Russia Today, "Zapped over Zapad: NATO double think on war games reaches brain-dead condition", 2017. <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/399482-zapad-nato-us-war-games/> [2020 11 02]

88 Russia Today, "Call to break up Russia by Latvian MP proof of NATO's hostile plans – senior lawmaker", 2018. <https://www.rt.com/russia/434618-russia-nato-split-plan/> [2020 10 25]

89 Russia Today, "Catfished: NATO dupes its own soldiers using fictitious Latvian woman on Tinder", 2019. <https://www.rt.com/news/470202-nato-tinder-russia-fake-news-test/> [2020 11 23]

Throughout the 5 year long time period that has been analyzed, the most stable feature was negative approach of the frames created. Even though it is hardly a surprise, it can prompt another important characteristic of the way pro-Kremlin media is framing NATO in the Baltic states. According to Kirk Hallahan and the models of framing he has described in his work "Seven Models of Framing: Implications for Public Relations", it can be seen, that *Russia Today* is widely using framing of attributes. In accordance with it, specific characteristics of objects, in this particular case – of NATO, are accentuated, whereas others are totally ignored.[90] In such way, processing of information in terms of focal attributes might be easily biased and presented in a beneficial way for message sponsors,[91] within the borders of this thesis – for pro-Russian media. As frames continued to be highly negative throughout the time of analysis, without any noticed exceptions, it can be assumed that Kremlin-funded media was neatly following the attributes form of framing. Adding to this, *Russia Today* has also been successfully fulfilling its main task of strongly biasing the information that media provides publicly and constructing favorable approach of the audience targeted. Just to ensure it, results revealed that frame of presenting NATO as "a major threat to Russia" was found for the most of times while conducting the analysis. It implies how widely partial information is presented and how only one side of situation is presented, using the framing of attributes.

Another important thing noticed during the analysis was a visible change in the nature of frames constructed. Before the deployment, material presented in *Russia Today* was clearly more concentrated on abstractly criticizing the very idea of NATO alliance, its roots and future goals, the values it preaches and the approach towards Russia it presents internationally. The nature of frames has considerably changed after the battlegroups deployment, when the media turned away from abstract image/idea of NATO to very precise and concrete examples. Since the day one, NATO troops have got under the magnifying glass, as every step they took in the countries they were settled in, was carefully traced and written about. Kremlin did not miss a single unfortunate incident during troops presence in the Baltics and made sure to hyperbolize each of them as much as possible. Also, all of the negative technical characteristics were greatly emphasized just as well, creating even stronger negative image presented online. While emphasizing even the slightest deficiencies and giving them additional emotional weight, source tried belittle NATO and depreciate its impact in the region, where the battlegroups have already been settled.

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[90] Kirk Hallahan, "Seven Models of Framing: Implications for Public Relations", *Journal* of *Public Relations Research,* 11(3), 1999, 209-210

[91] Ibid, 212

What has been also noticed, considering more technical side of framing, was the continuous repetition and not only of particular words or phrases, but that is quite the essence of the whole thesis and therefore the frames of NATO image can be generated in general. Instead of words, repetition of whole paragraphs or even several of them in a row, was spotted throughout the articles of RT numerous times. Actually, repetitiveness has also been recognized as one of main characteristics of contemporary Russian propaganda. Together with being rapid, continuous, lacking commitment to objective reality, it is also stated to be highly repetitive. This is mainly because "repetition leads to familiarity, and familiarity leads to acceptance".[92] Throughout the 5-year period analyzed, many articles shared identical sentences and whole paragraphs, that is most likely to be explained because repeated exposure to some kind of statement or message has been shown to increase its acceptance as true.

Following observations could easily be proved during a simple check with *Google* search engine: taking one of the quotes, used to define frames of NATO image in Russian propaganda, and putting it into search field, even minimizing the search only within *rt.com* portal. Results that one gets are shocking and convincing: for example, a quote of Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksey Meshkov that "This [NATO] deployment [in Eastern Europe] is, of course, a threat for us", has been cited at least in 9 (!) different articles, issued within a period of 3 months. Said once - quoted numerous, this logic only proves the before-mentioned tactic of repetitiveness that Russians seem to be taking into usage quite seriously.

Reconsidering it, repetition must not only have saved up some time for the authors, when only titles have changed and parts of the texts remained the same, but also the "illusory truth effect" might have worked out. Following effect is well documented, whereby people rate statements as way more truthful, trustworthy, and believable when they have encountered those same statements previously than when they are new and unseen before statements.[93] That way, messages are way less carefully processed, so can reach the targeted audience and create an impact to it so much easier and of bigger volume.

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[92] Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, "The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It", Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html> [2020 02 23]

[93] Ibid

Study Limitations

Even though the in-depth analysis covered a fair number of different articles, the research faced a few limitations that should be mentioned and taken into account while estimating its outcomes. The findings of the thesis are limited only to the publicly available articles and statements of the pro-Kremlin news site *rt.com*, meaning that the whole analysis is solely build only upon its material, leaving behind other websites, even if treated as misinformative. It should also be stressed further, that the timeframe was limited as well, taking into consideration period between years of 2015 and 2019. Therefore, the most current pieces (from the start of 2020 and onwards) were not researched in spite of the fact that some of them have already been available online but did not cover the whole year, as the research and data collection have been started at the very beginning of 2020. As the media process of negatively picturing NATO in Russian disinformation shows no signs of stopping throughout the years, more and more analyses, covering up-to-date information, should be conducted and constantly updated. In the following way, all of the possible differences and occurring changes of frames, their constructs or methods of framing might be noticed and analyzed.

On the other hand, not only a look forward considering the most recent data could be taken, but also, a look back. Selected and grounded time frame of the research leaves behind articles written until 2015. Taking earlier articles into consideration, not only a possible change of frames or framing techniques used in pro-Kremlin source could be found, but the progress of disinformation itself as well as improvement of its diffusion. As stated before, clear advancement of Russia disinformation measures taken, and techniques used has already been noticed. That is why the in-depth analysis of earlier articles and their comparison with recent ones could actually reveal the speed and the genuine level of development.

Furthermore, due to more fluent understanding of English language, only those articles written in English were taken into consideration, ignoring the ones in Russian language. Internet webpage *rt.com* is more concentrated on wider and more international, not settling only for Russia, audience and is fulfilled with material presented in English. It is highly likely, that the messages written in Russian language and created solely for Russian-speaking audience, inside the boundaries of Russia and outside of it as well, would be creating even more negative image of NATO and would be even more harsh towards the Alliance and its member states. Thus, separate analysis of Russian-based articles could be conducted.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

As the main goal of the research was seizing of a clear constructed image of NATO, the whole thesis was considerably structured to extensively reveal the image of the Alliance created by and presented in the pro-Kremlin disinformative source, *rt.com*, and dedicated primarily for three Baltic States. Taking into consideration numerous articles that could have been interpreted in numerous different ways, a legit type of method for analyzing them must have been applied. One of a kind for such both quantitive and qualitative research is a framing theory, that became the central tool for conducting the analysis. The major premise of this theory is the already mentioned variety of perspectives that an issue can be viewed and constructed from. As for the methodology, the inquiry included framework analysis by Goffman and inductive thematic analysis by Boyatzis. The need for the latter one resulted from the basis of the whole work, which was entirely data driven. No prior hypotheses were presented, even though they might have been predictable. Despite that, the answer to the research question solely depended on the collected materials – articles from RT website, fitting into determined criteria.

At the beginning, main foreseeable tasks of the research were to reveal very details of constructed NATO image, to unfold main framing mechanisms used and to estimate possible consequences that may follow. Taking them into consideration, it can be concluded, that the tasks were achieved, and all of the necessary data has been represented. The purpose of the thesis was to figure out main frames concerning NATO image constructed by massive Russian media outlet RT. The study had the aim of exploring the articles solely from the particular website and making assumptions directly from those articles. Prior to the actual analysis, related scholarly articles were analyzed, to reveal the possible field of potential analysis

After gathering the suitable data and processing the results of analysis, main conclusions can be purified. After fully completing foreseen tasks of the analysis, final conclusions are threefold. To begin with, it is important to note that frames used to picture NATO in *Russia Today* have changed during time, if comparing two separate time periods of similar length, before and after establishing the NATO-mission "enhanced Forward Presence" in the Baltic countries. Nature of frames moved from agitating against the hostile, anti-Russian organization as a notional idea, as an abstract, towards real disadvantages of the Alliance, such as under-equipment or unfortunate events during Alliance's presence in different allied countries. The shift of framing's nature can be interpreted as a reasonable choice. Before the NATO troops deployment in the Baltic countries, disinformative

articles have been structured to belittle NATO as such and diminish its possible influence as much as possible. It can be hypothesized, that disinformation campaign even cherished some hopes to affect the decision of battlegroups deployment in the neighborhood. Once it did not happen and implementation has been successfully completed, another strategy of dealing with NATO influence in the region was taken into action. Closely observing every step during battlegroups presence in the countries, each minor incident has been exaggerated and brought to public. With this tactic, media has been trying to show the worst side of Alliance's deployment and create a highly rejective public opinion towards its presence in the Baltic states. Despite the possibility of different reasoning for the change, it still can be concluded, that the first tested preposition proved to be correct as the change of the nature of frames was clearly visible.

Moving on to the tone of frames presented in the articles, the difference comparing two periods of time is hardly visible. Despite the context of any article that has been taken into consideration, NATO continued to be pictured exceedingly negatively. Alliance has been presented as a hostile, Russophobic, provocative and aggressive bloc. Furthermore, it has been noticed to lack not only proper equipment, but even basic human manners and a simple sense of logic, while constantly acting against "friendly and positively disposed Russia". Even though that quite different frames have been chosen before and after the implementation of NATO battlegroups in the Baltics, the tone continued to be obstructive throughout the time. Therefore, the second tested preposition proved to be wrong, as no difference considering the tone of the frames was noticed.

Result of such kind of analysis is basically threefold. Firstly, it provides the most often operated cliches and NATO constructs in pro-Russian media that later on could be noticed earlier and with less effort. Also, just as importantly, having such information also gives an opportunity to proceed with the tools to defend/counterattack the false framing of NATO or using them to educate audience in order to prevent as many people as possible from false information and the consequences that may follow. Such thrusts to develop the informational resilience in the countries as setting up a strong national institution for strategic communication, adaptation of technological means or full-fledged education of all age groups, would be highly recommended and could lead to successful outcomes in the long run. And finally, it becomes a bit clearer, where the constructed image of NATO stands, when compared to the images presented in other regions. As NATO construct created by Russian disinformation in Balkans has been described earlier, it particularly can be compared to the one found in the Baltics. Comparing frames purified, it can be noticed that while frames in Balkans highlighted the dysfunctionality of the Alliance, Russian media has not even once questioned that in the Baltics. On the contrary, in the Baltic States NATO was presented

as highly functional, yet threatening and wrong-doing bloc. Even though the images slightly varied, idea of demonising NATO remained the same. Unsurprisingly, the tone of frames in both regions remained very negative throughout the time and no exceptions of that case have been noticed throughout the time.

Recommendations for Further Research

There are many possible areas for further research, which includes: broadening the timeframe, including Russian language for more proper view of identity's construction or adding other important websites, that might not have been recognized as harmful internationally yet. Furthermore, an interesting study can be conducted if the researcher connects and is able to simultaneously compare the image of NATO constructed by Kremlin and by the Western countries, such as France or Belgium, that plays an important role in its history.

A deeper and more encompassing future research might also focus on comparisons of the image of NATO of Russian media to the ones of the Russian society. It will be very intriguing to see if the perception presented on pro-Kremlin websites in English language, coincides with the ones of the regular Russian citizens. In addition to the provision of some guidance for further research, this concrete thesis has largely contributed to the literature concerning NATO identity's claims. With help of this study, one can get a clear picture of how and based on what arguments pro-Kremlin media convinces national and international audience that NATO is an organization of pure evil.

Moreover, a possibility of geographically wider analysis becomes possible. As within this thesis image of NATO has been shortly compared to NATO construct in Balkans, another regions where pro-Kremlin media is relatively active could be also taken into comparison. Especially it would be beneficial to compare countries, where the Russian influence has been felt the strongest, such as all of the countries from the post-Soviet space. In such way, a wider and clearer image of how Russian information operations are being applied to the region and what kind of NATO constructs they create, according to the audience they are targeting.

In addition to the provision of some guidance for further research, this concrete thesis has largely contributed to the literature concerning disinformation provided by *Russia Today* and its constructed NATO image. Usually, Russian disinformation is being taken as a single unit, not dividing them into separate channels, and its approach is generalized, presenting it abstractly, without any details. With the help of this study, both, framing of specifically *Russia Today* and in a very detailed way, are being presented and, thus, creating additional value to the analyses of this sphere.

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Appendix 1. The List of All Articles

List is provided chronologically subdivided according to the month of publishing:

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Summary

The primary purpose of this thesis was to determine major messages considering NATO image, provided by pro-Kremlin media network *Russia Today* within three Baltic States. The research was specifically concerned with analyzing publicly available online articles found on *rt.com* website in order to fulfil the aim of the study.

The thesis first examined the existing literature concerning the similar matter. Hence, the first part mainly provides an outline of relevant scholarly articles, that revealed what has been already analyzed and what kind of field for future research was still opened. An overview of the material revealed that a particular topic has been hardly researched recently.

For conduction of the analysis, framing theory has been chosen for the main methodological tool. As framing refers to the process by which people are able to develop a specific conceptualisation of a certain issue or at least reorient their thinking about the same issue, it decently fit to analyze and explain constructed NATO image from the point of view of Russian disinformative information source.

The timeframe of the analysis was between the years of 2015 and 2019, similar time periods before and after the establishment of the NATO-mission "enhanced Forward Presence". Analysis was solely data driven on articles from *Russia Today* webpage, that has been recognized as Kremlin-tied and disinformative. All of the articles not only must have fitted the timeframe but also been written in English language, included a keyword "NATO" and one (or more) of the names of the Baltic countries: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia or the Baltics in general.

Analysis revealed that the webpage was highly demonising the Alliance, constantly picturing it as a threat to Russia, an aggressive, russophobic bloc, that has been destabilizing whole region. It is important to emphasize, that nature of frames clearly differed, comparing two periods of time, before and after the battlegroups' deployment. They moved from agitating against the hostile, anti-Russian organization as a notional idea and as an abstract, towards real disadvantages of the Alliance, such as under-equipment or unfortunate events during Alliance's presence in different allied countries. Noticed main framing mechanism – framing of attributes – remained more or less the same throughout the analysis. The tone of frames used have not changed at all during the time of analysis and consecutively remained highly negative.

The aim of the thesis was reached as the articles allowed to determine what were the main frames used to picture NATO, what were the messages of *Russia Today* presenting NATO as a

major threat and what framing mechanisms were used to assure national and international audience that their claims were relevant.