

The basic concepts of the Baltic States image in the Russian periodical press after the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991–2009)

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Abstract. *The Russian Federation and the Baltic States region are neighbors belonging to different geopolitical paradigms. Since 2004, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are members of the European Union and NATO. Russia after a short period of pseudo-democratization after the collapse of the Soviet Union came back to imperial discourse in so-called Putin's era. The new imperial discourse is based on concepts of the "Russian world", "compatriots" as well as on the specific strategy in relations with states from "near abroad". Periodical press and another media (especially, TV) are involved in political processes of the Russian Federation. Research of the Baltic States' image in the Russian periodical press shows how this particular geopolitical region (of the Baltic States) is represented in the Russian media in different periods after the collapse of the Soviet Union.*

Key words: *Baltic States, Russian Federation, periodical press, image, propaganda.*

Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Federation and the Baltic States have chosen different geopolitical directions. Russia attempted to keep influence over the post-Soviet area. The Baltic States have chosen to integrate into the so-called Western World and became members of the European Union and NATO more than ten years ago.

The difference in geopolitical choices defines the use of some specific concepts in the construction of the Baltic States image in the Russian press. These concepts extend to different levels, for example historical, economic, political etc. They constitute a paradigm built into the Russian mass media and a conceptual image of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

It is possible to highlight some basic concepts, depending on:

- the interpretation of modern relations between the Baltic States and Russia;
- the social and political position of the Russian-speaking minorities (compatriots) in the Baltic States;
- the interpretation of the common (soviet) past;
- vectors of geopolitical integration.

The changes in these concepts and their different aspects allow us to observe an evolution of the Baltic States image in the Russian press. This image has undergone some important changes since the collapse of the Soviet Union. For example, the image of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in 1991 was rather ambivalent. On one hand, the Baltic States were depicted as the destroyers of the Soviet Union. On the other, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were an example of successful democratization (Simonian, 2004: 450).

In the early post-Soviet times, the image of the Baltic States in the Russian press was one of the “mostly non-friendly” (rus. *недружественные*) countries. Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia did not take part in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) – the Moscow-led geopolitical project that tried to preserve the former architecture of USSR. The idea of integrating into the European Union and NATO appeared in the political agendas of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. The Baltic States were also criticized by the Russian authorities for “violating the rights” (rus. *нарушение прав*) of the Russian-speaking minorities (especially in Latvia and Estonia).

However, at the same time, the image of the Baltic States was not completely negative. For example, the Russian press published articles about the economic achievements of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia

(the main aspect of the positive image of the Baltic States in the Russian press in the '90s). There was also an element of nostalgia and remembrance of the “good old times” shared in the Soviet Union, a sort of lost Golden Age myth (Girardet, 2007) too.

During the first ten years of the 21st century, the image of the Baltic States in the Russian media became mostly negative. Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were represented as hostile to the Russian compatriots. Russia accused the Baltic States of “revising history” (rus. *ревизия/фальсификация истории*). The accusation belongs to different interpretations of the shared historical past, mostly the World War II (in Russian, the Great Patriotic War) period and the Soviet epoch after World War II.

There are some correlations between the negativity of the image of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia in the Russian press and the political processes inside Russia. After Vladimir Putin rose to power in early 2000, there was a trend towards a new authoritarianism, or, in other words, towards the development of the “power vertical” (Lucas, 2008). Most media channels (TV, radio, press) got under state control and became mouthpieces of the official position of the government of the Russian Federation (in most cases: agents of state propaganda).

M. Lipman described the situation of the media sphere in modern Russia in the following way: “In Putin’s Russia, the media which provide coverage of political and public affairs may be roughly divided into two categories. The first is the largest mass-audience media, especially national TV channels, which reach almost 100 per cent of Russian households. The three major national channels are used as tools of state propaganda in a way that is increasingly reminiscent of the Soviet days. The second category includes a variety of smaller-audience outlets – print, radio, websites and smaller TV stations. This category is of less interest for the ruling elite as a political resource, but all the Russian media operate on the understanding that loyalty to the state is the order of the day” (Lipman, 2009: 8).

In the 2000s, the Russian press started classified treatment of the Baltic States as “Other” (“Constitutive Other”) (Gudkov, 2004). But this position is still ambivalent in the Russian media. On one hand, the Baltic States in this position are seen as representing another – Western – civilization (using Huntington’s (1993) concept¹). This means that in the clash between Eastern (Russian-Orthodox) and Western civilizations the Baltic States are on the Western side. On the other hand, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia could still be imagined as the “lost territories” in the neo-imperial discourse of modern Russia. Russian compatriots² in the Baltic States are part of the global Russian World (in Moscow’s interpretation). It means that Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are also part of Russia’s potential geopolitical interests, when “in terms of Russia’s strategic aims at the “reintegration of post-Soviet space”, Russia sees no difference between the C.I.S. and the Baltic States” (The “Humanitarian Dimension”..., 2009).

The image of the Baltic States and its evolution in the Russian media is important particularly now when the region is facing new challenges (information warfare, the threat of the hybrid war etc.). The exploration of the basic concepts of the Baltic States image in the Russian press could help to find a way to better understand Russia’s views towards Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and to find out clues why some public opinion research finds that these three small neighboring states in the eyes of ordinary Russians are “the most hostiles states” (“enemies”) (Левада-Центр, 2014).

¹ Huntington mentioned that civilizations are different from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and religion. He defines some basic civilizations: Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin America, Africa (Huntington, 1993: 25). In this article, modern Russia is attributed as the core of Slavic-Orthodox civilization, and the Baltic States as the cross-border territory of Western civilization.

² Dovile Jakniūnaitė references that: “Compatriots are defined as people who feel a spiritual bond with Russia and its culture, civilization, history” (Jakniūnaitė, 2007: 149).

Mapping the image of the Baltic States in the Russian periodical press

The case of the Baltic States as a geopolitical region of the post-soviet area³ is analyzed in this research. The regional dimension is grounded by historical aspects: “The Soviet occupation and annexation grouped Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in the trilateral Baltic cluster” (Jurkynas, 2007: 19). The Baltic States also had a similar “start” after the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to M. Jurkynas: “From the Soviet rule the Baltic States inherited quite similar economic and political problems” (Ibid). The Baltic States as an integral geopolitical region are also recognized by Laurinavičius, Motieka, Statkus (2005), Lucas (2008).

This research is based on data from three Russian newspapers: “Argumenty i fakty”, “Komsomolskaja pravda” and “Izvestia”. They were and still are some of the most popular newspapers in the Russian Federation (Jeroshkina et al., 2011).

There were 5 time clusters selected from the whole period of the research (1991–2009). Every cluster is related to a particular period of political changes in the Russian Federation and/or geopolitical changes in the Baltic region:

- 1991 (the collapse of the Soviet Union);
- 1996 (the first President election in the Russian Federation after the collapse of the USSR);
- 2000 (the first year of so-called “Putin era”);
- 2003–2004 (V. Putin was reelected as President of the Russian Federation / the Baltic States become members of the EU and NATO);
- 2008–2009 (beginning of the period of so-called “tandemocracy”⁴).

³ This article does not represent research of a separate image of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. The present part of research was focused only on the Baltic States as geopolitical region image.

⁴ Political tandem between President Dmitrij Medvedev and the Prime Minister Vladimir Putin after the Presidential elections in 2008.

The goal of the research was to identify the basic concepts of the Baltic States image in the Russian periodical press and to interpret them in the light of their place and meanings in the maps of the images.

Monitoring of the publications in the Russian periodical press was carried out. The subject of monitoring was mentioned in all of the time clusters in the aforementioned newspapers. In total, 344 “Baltic States topic” texts (published in “Argumenty i fakty”, “Komsomolskaja pravda”, “Izvestia”) were found (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of texts (regarding the Baltic States) by time clusters published in “Argumenty i fakty”, “Komsomolskaja pravda”, “Izvestia”

Cluster:	1991	1996	2000	2003–2004	2008–2009
Texts:	130	48	40	44	82
					Total: 344

Source: authors’ research data

Linguistic text analysis was chosen as a methodological approach of research. The basic concepts that belong to the Baltic States image were identified in every text. First of all, the meanings of basic concepts were explored. Later, every concept was classified as belonging to positive or negative connotation. As a result, two kinds of images were identified during the research process: positive and negative. The negative image dominated in all time slots. The main features of the image were: the Baltic States were defined in terms “other”, “strange”, “hostile states” etc. The negative image is visualized in Figure 1.

The map of the negative image displays clear tendencies. First of all, there are reiterative elements of the Baltic States image. It is possible to group mentioned elements by subjects:

Group 1. Russophobia and nationalism. The accusation of being Russophobes and nationalists (also – fascists) is a strong part of the structure of the Baltic States image in the Russian periodical press. It is an element of propaganda, which is related to the historical level of the image (the anti-communist resistance of the Baltic States in 1944–1953 presented in the Soviet propaganda as “criminal”, “fascistic”; the Rus-

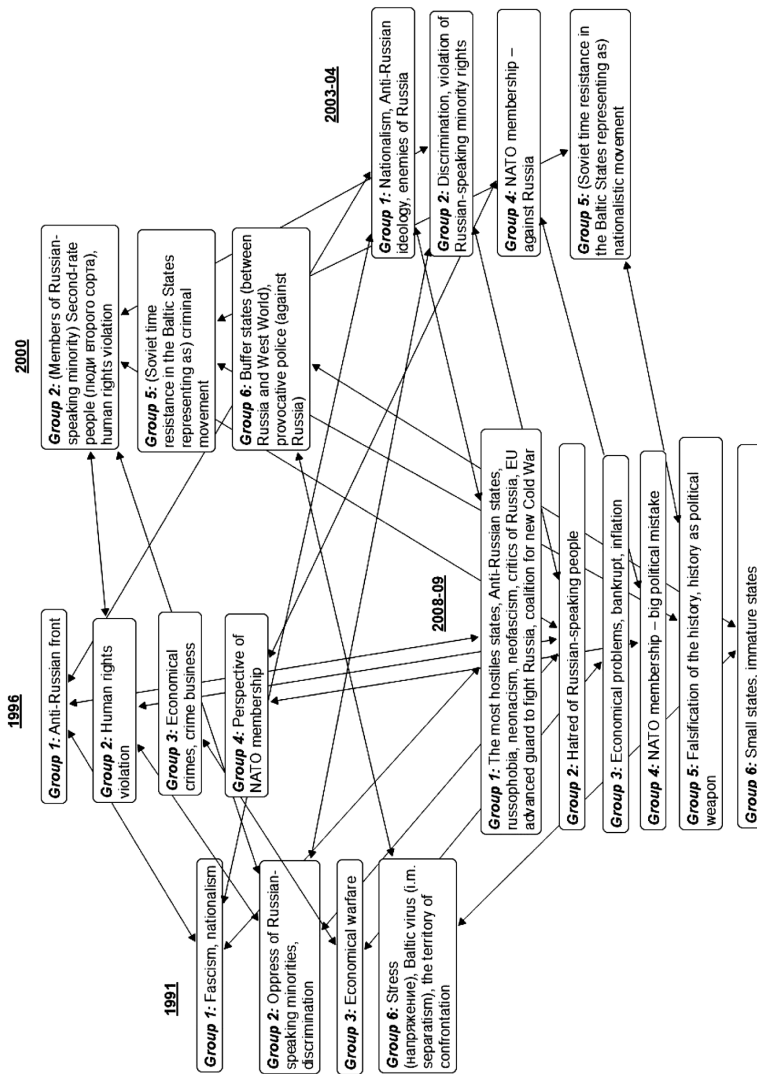


Figure 1. Map of the negative image of the Baltic States in the Russian periodical press
Source: authors' research data

sian propaganda adopts those rhetorical figures in nowadays). In fact, the propaganda concepts of Russophobia, nationalism and fascism are being used as synonyms. They have a strong negative connotation.

Nationalism (sometimes – Nazism) and fascism are concepts belonging to the Russian Federation's official politic (state) narrative about the Victory in the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) (Gudkov, 2004). The element of Russophobia in the image of the Baltic States is part of the modern Russian mythology. This element is grounded by the conviction that people in the Baltic States “hate Russia” and all what is related to Russia.

Group 2. Violation of human rights. The accusation of the human rights violation is another part of the negative image of the Baltic States in the Russian periodical press. This subject is related to the problem of the so-called compatriots (rus. *соотечественники*). The Russian periodical press describes it in terms of the oppressed Russian-speaking minority, discrimination. It is popular to state that the Russian compatriots are “second-rate people” (rus. *люди второго сорта*) in the Baltic States. This level is directly connected to the narrative of **Russophobia and nationalism**.

Group 3. Economy. The paradigm of the economy in the negative image of the Baltic States is grounded in the Russian periodical press by the view that post-communist Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are “failed states”. The structure of the “failed state” view is supported by observations of economic hardships and mismanagement (bankruptcies, unemployment, poverty, corruption, deindustrialization, etc.). The Baltic States were presented as economically weak and dependent. This discourse also stressed the “grey” area of business and economy (lack of transparency, criminal issues, etc).

Group 4. Security. The security subject belongs to the matter of NATO enlargement at the beginning of XXI century. In the Russian periodical press, the Baltic States' membership of NATO is characterized as an action “against Russia” (2003–2004) and a “big political mistake” (2008–2009). This action has a clear negative correlation in the structure of the Baltic States image in the Russian periodical press.

Group 5. History. This level of discourse correlates with the *Russophobia and nationalism*. The main point of the *historical* discourse is the resistance of the 1944–1953 period. The structural element of this discursive layer also provides the interpretation of the “Soviet past”. This narrative is mostly visible in 2008–2009. It could be explained by modern changes in the Russian policy. The Russian Federation in this period returned to the soviet-style interpretation of the USSR history. Resistance of the Baltic States was defined as “gangsterism” (rus. *бандитизм*), criminal activity etc.

In the modern discourse, there was also a turn back to the official Soviet interpretation of the fact of the Baltic States’ occupation. In the modern Russian historical narrative (similarly as during the Soviet times), it is represented as a free-will membership in the USSR. The Soviet Union here is presented as an economic donor of the Baltic States (there are some correlations with the *Economic* discourse). At the same time, the periodical Russian press accused the Baltic States of “falsification of the history”.

Group 6. Common characteristics. Collected characteristics show the generalized image of the Baltic States in the Russian periodical press. These characteristics could not be attributed to another (aforementioned) groups of discourse.

The map of the negative image shows that the most regular elements of the Baltic States image in the Russian periodical press structure are elements of Group 1 and Group 2. In fact, they underlie the negative image. Other elements depend on the modern historical context. For example, the subject of the economy is most visible in the period of 2008–2009 (period of the World financial crisis). The security concerns (Group 4) become more visible in the periods of 1996 (two years after the Baltic States made a decision to integrate the NATO), 2003–2004 (the Baltic States became NATO members) and 2008–2009 (growing ideological confrontation Russia vs. NATO). The historical theme became more visible in the 2000s (period of the new Russian propaganda growth). The common characteristics (Group 6) also have their spe-

cific traits: for example, “Baltic virus” (separatism) in 1991 or “failed states” image in 2008–2009.

The elements from different time slots with the negativity aspect are closely related. It allows concluding that the Russian periodical press represents an integral, strongly negative image of the Baltic States.

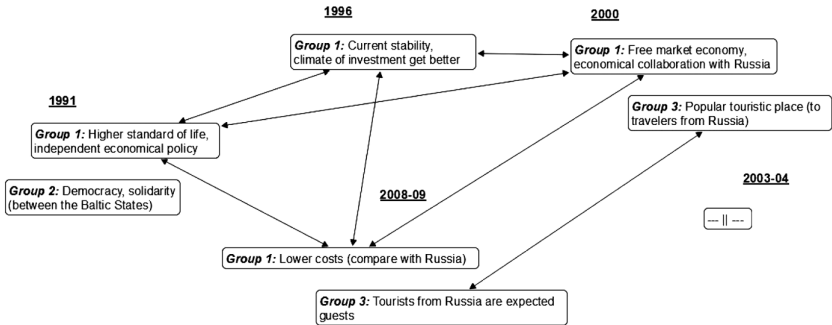


Figure 2. Map of the positive image of the Baltic states in the Russian periodical press (years)

Source: authors' research data

Comparing with the strong negative image, the positive image has a different configuration. There is one major positive theme, it deals with the economy. Groups of the positive image have no strong connections, as compared to the groups in the negative image map. The positive image is visualized in Figure 2.

Group 1. Economy. The ground for this group was formed by recognition of higher (than in the Russian Federation) economic progress of the Baltic States. In the publications of the Russian periodical press that were explored, statements of “higher standards of life” were found (1991), “current stability” (1996), “lower costs” (2008–2009) etc. As a positive process, the “economic collaboration with Russia” (2000) is also mentioned.

Group 2. Political process. This issue was important only in the first time slot (1991). It depends on the historical situation: the Baltic States were viewed as an example of successful democratization in the USSR.

Group 3. Social relations. The social relations narrative, in fact, contradicts the image of the Baltic States as “Russophobic” (Group 1 from the negative image). This discourse is anchored in the statement that the Baltic States are a “popular place” among travelers from Russia (2000) and a similar proposition that “tourist from Russia are expected guests” in the Baltic States.

No positive elements of the image of the Baltic States were identified in 2003–2004. It does not mean that the Baltic States image was totally negative during the selected period⁵, however, clearly positive characteristic of the Baltic States in this period have not been found in any of the three newspapers that were explored.

Conclusions

The image of the Baltic States in Russian periodical press is ambivalent. It has two constitutive parts, or, in fact, two opposite images – negative and positive. The result of the research was the determination of domination of the negative image. The negative image of the Baltic States in the Russian periodical press also had more elements than the positive image.

The basic concepts of the negative image of the Baltic States can be sorted in 6 groups. In fact, there are two groups of the main structural elements of the image (found in every time slot of the research) and four complementary groups (depended on political and/or geopolitical situation of the research clusters).

The strongest elements of the negative image of the Baltic States in the Russian periodical press are the accusation of “Russophobia”, “nationalism” (“fascism”) and violation of the rights of compatriots (Russian-speaking minorities). The complementary elements of the negative image are related to subjects of economical failures, “falsifica-

⁵ Some positive characteristics of this cluster were found in another part of the research (not present in this article), when separate images of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were analyzed.

tion of the history” and estimation of the Baltic States’ membership of NATO as a decision “against Russia” and a “big political mistake”.

The basic concepts of the positive image of the Baltic States can be sorted in 3 groups. There is one main group, which is related to the economy. The Baltic States are defined as better economically developed countries (than the Russian Federation). Two complementary groups of the positive image are related to the political level (in late Soviet times the Baltic States are represented as an example of democratic changes) and level of social relations (the statement that “tourists from Russia are expected guests” in the Baltic States).

The maps of the image show that Russia (or Russia-related subjects, for example, compatriots) takes an important place in the Baltic States image in the Russian periodical press takes. Russia is like an axis around which the image, characterizing the Baltic States relation to the Russian Federation and/or Russia’s reaction (estimation) to some events in the Baltic States, is configured.

Domination of the negative image shows that the Baltic States are portrayed in the Russian periodical press as “hostile countries” or as a part of another/different civilization.

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