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KREMLIN INFORMATION CAMPAIGN IN THE BALTIC STATES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ESCALATION OF SPRING 2020

The authors examine pro-Russian media outlets during the escalation of COVID-19 pandemics in Spring 2020 (March–May). Strategic narratives constructed and disseminated by the Russian Federation for the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) may emphasize: political and economic motives related to the policies of governments of the Baltic states; status-related motives to disrupt the international system and Western-led political institutions through the Baltic states; conflictual motives indicating opposing identities between Russian and Baltic nations, which have often emphasized the Russophobic context of the Baltic identity-building. These strategic narratives are part of Moscow's strategy that aim is to destroy the unity of West and to increase ideological fragmentation in the European Union. Therefore, Baltic states have become an important target of influence operations conducted by the Russian Federation because of their geopolitical location and strategic importance.

Keywords: Russia, strategic narratives, COVID-19, Baltic states, international system, EU, economic, crisis, politics, influence activity.

1. INTRODUCTION[3]

The massive spread of corona-virus (SARS-CoV-2) started in China in late 2019[4]. The virus developed into the pandemic disease of COVID-19 conquered most of the world by early 2020. The world experience with the pandemic of testified that in the globalized world, in addition to imminent military threats, mankind faces a variety of miscellaneous risks the impact of which on the global security environment is often unpredictable (Franke, 2015; Renz, 2016; Heap, Krauel, Althuis, 2019).

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[4] World Health Organization, Coronavirus 2020. [access: 8.05.2020]. Access on the internet: https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus.

Often these threats and challenges are hybrid in nature and will simultaneously target various strategic vulnerabilities of opponent societies like historical memory, legislation, traditions, geostrategic factors, technological disadvantages, or a polarisation of society by ideological differences, among others (Sazonov, Koort, Heinsoo, Paas 2020)[5]. During the crisis it became obvious that the world was insufficiently prepared to deal with such an unconventional and untraditional security threats like the spread of pandemic diseases, Open societies of the Western world are particularly vulnerable in the time of crisis, being more influenced by fear-mongering emotions (e.g. fear and uncertainty) that influence public opinion. This produces widespread anxiety in society and puts pressure on elected politicians who should take into account popular trends in their decision-making process.

The vulnerabilities of the Western liberal democratic system have been often successfully abused by revisionist powers interested in changing the balance of power, and a number of status-seeking rising powers interested in changing the status quo in the current post-Cold war international order (e.g., China and Russian Federation) aimed to strengthen their international status in order to increase their influence in international relations (Lebow, 2010). All in all, the interoperability of the international community in standing against unconventional security threats left much to be desired during the corona-crisis. For example, China has skilfully used panic caused by the spread of coronavirus in its propaganda activities against the United States and European Union as it sees them as potential economic rivals (Rough, 2020). The main goal of Russia's information activities and influence operations is to widen the political gap between Europe and the United States and to reduce the US contribution to NATO and the European security. The second purpose is to shape public opinion and to mobilize populist movements in the Western societies that oppose the liberal democratic principles and are sceptical about the constitutional guarantees of minorities and the protection of individual rights on behalf of the Kremlin strategic interests (Makarychev, Sazonov, 2019).

The goal of influence operations in general is to direct societal attitudes by sowing panic and fear and creating information confusion or chaos. The most important tools of modern influence operations are not only related to the mainstream media but also social media can reach target groups, these capabilities having been developed not only by Russia but also by China (EEAS Special Report Update, 2020). Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms and channels have long become instruments of information manipulation through which messages delivered to the target audience may contain distorted and skewed information or outright falsehoods. For example, China's outreach has projected thousands of English-language social media posts accusing the United States of unleashing the virus (Weedon, Nuland, Stamos, 2017).

The global spread of SARS-CoV-2 is just one new episode of influencing efforts perpetrated by these countries to take advantage of the chaotic situation created by the virus (Latvijas Radio, 2020). Insufficient preparedness of the globalizing world to respond to the crisis of COVID-19 increases the effectiveness of illiberal challenges in which corona virus becomes an effective propaganda tool that can destabilize liberal democratic societies by sowing insecurity, fear and confusion. With the spread of the pandemic of COVID-19 a lot of information noise, fake-news and conspiracy theories have been released and

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[5] Countering Hybrid Threats. [access: 1.05.2020]. Access on the internet: https://www. hybridcoe.fi/hybrid-threats/.

disseminated into both the mainstream and social media (Barnes, Rosenberg, Wong, 28.03.2020).

This article analyses the affiliation and the strategic narratives produced and disseminated by the Russian Federation in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania during the spread of COVID-19 in selected articles from media outlets supporting the Kremlin's policy. The concept of strategic narratives has been widely adopted in political communication and international relations (Antoniades, O'Loughlin, Miskimmon, 2010; Roselle, Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, 2013). Strategic narratives take into account stories existing in the collective memory as well as other factors framing the interpretative atmosphere (e.g., shared ideological beliefs, political agendas, but also people's fears and expectations) (Ventsel, Hansson, Madisson, Sazonov, 2019). The better political actors succeed in aligning the narratives of the system, politics and identity with their strategic goals, the greater chance they have to increase their influence in international relations (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, Roselle, 2018).

2. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative content analysis was applied to analyse the collected data by using a hidden pilot sample (three articles from three different publications) on the basis of which primary coding was performed (Kracauer, 1953; Kuckartz, 2014). A substantive analysis of a larger number of articles followed the pilot study. The authors analyzed the content of specific texts as well as the expressions, words and sentences in the articles, including the tone of the texts (e.g., emotionality, ridiculing, intimidation). When analysing the results it is important to keep in mind that the method used in this article makes it possible to determine the presence of certain motifs in the publications under examination, but this study does not allow the deduction of broader generalization about the extent or consequences of influencing.

3. DATA SAMPLE

In this study, the authors focused on 15 articles published from 20 March to 15 May 2020 in the following news agencies: *Baltnews.ee, RuBaltic.ru, Inosmi.ru, Взгляд.ру, Ритм Евразии* and *Sputnik,* known for supporting the strategic goals of the Putin administration of Russia. The selection was made by the target audience of the Russophone community in the Baltic states. The preliminary results of the study were published in the Estonian Journal "Sõjateadlane" (Military Scientist) (Mölder, Sazonov, 2020)*.

RuBaltic.ru. was founded in January 2013 on the initiative of researchers from Moscow and Kaliningrad; its editor-in-chief currently is Sergei Rekeda[6]. The information agency *Sputnik International* was established in 2014 with the aim of developing Russia's influence operations abroad. Its actions in Estonia were terminated in 2019 after sanctions against the Kremlin propaganda channel *Rossija Segodnya* (Russia Today), which owns the agency (Err.ee, 2019). In the Baltic states, Sputnik's representative office continues to operate in Latvia. The server for Lithuanian-oriented *Sputnik Lietuva* is located in Russia. *Inosmi.ru* is an online portal registered on April 8 2014 by the state-owned company *Rossija*

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[6] Редакция. – RuBaltic.ru. [Access: 19.05.2020]. Access on the internet: https://www. rubaltic.ru/edition/.

Segodnya. It is focused on Western news, and they publish a lot about the Baltic states (Spriņģe, 2018).

Baltnews.ee belongs to the Russian state media group *Rossiya Segodnya*, which is led by Dmitry Kisselyov. According to the Estonian Security Police, Baltnews.ee is a pro-Kremlin source financed by the Russian Federation and its target audience are Russophone people in the Baltic states. The activities of *Baltnews.ee* are financed through shadow companies located in various European countries (Kaitsepolitsei aastaraamat 2015; Propastop, 2018).

The web portal *"Взгляд.ру"* (Sight) belongs to the Russian online newspaper *Vzglyad*. Its editor-in-chief is Konstantin Kondrashin and it has been in publication since May 2005. The newspaper's editorial office is located in Moscow[7]. The *Ритм Евразии* (*Rhythm of Eurasia*) is a Russian-language platform which was created primarily for politicians, public figures, experts and journalists in the post-Soviet space, but they also have a wider target audience[8].

4. STRATEGIC NARRATIVES IN THE KREMLIN'S INFLUENCE ACTIVITIES

G.H. Karlsen (2019) analyses intelligence reports from various countries and argues that Russia has three primary strategic goals: ensuring the power and security of the Putin administration in the country; maintaining influence in the "near abroad" (former USSR countries except three Baltic states); and securing the status of a great power internationally. Russia's influence operations outside the post-Soviet space disseminate strategic narratives that amplify or shape perceptions of the world and political preferences in line with the Kremlin's foreign policy goals (Mölder, Sazonov, 2018; van Herpen, 2016). The Kremlin's strategic narratives are often targeted at various alternative and anti-establishment groups, which may represent both the right and left side of the political spectrum, e.g., Eurosceptics, anti-US, anti-immigration and anti-globalization movements. Strategic narratives are brought to target groups through public and covert methods. In doing so, the narratives conveyed often remain declarative without specifying specific steps or timelines or assessing their effectiveness in achieving the objectives (Kuhrt, Feklyunina, 2017).

Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin's long-time leading ideologue who was fired by presidential order in February 2020, stated that among Russia's highest strategic goals is to become a world leader, and for that it must first and foremost guarantee the welfare of its citizens (Mäkinen, 2011). Surkov's concept of modernization without Westernization has strongly influenced the policies of Vladimir Putin's administration and has had a rather significant impact on Russia's strategic narratives. His perceptions of Russia's sovereign democracy can be understood as a unique way for the Russian Federation to achieve its strategic goals, where no outside power dictates to Russia and the Russians how this path should proceed (Yablokov, 2018). One of the key elements in Surkov's concept is to strengthen the worldwide competitiveness of the Russian economy. Russia's raw materials-based economy should be transformed into an innovative and intellectual economy (Surkov, 2008). President Vladimir Putin has called Russia a unique civilization that must be protected through the development of genetics, artificial intelligence, unmanned vehicles and other high technologies (The Moscow Times, 2020).

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[7] Выходные данные [Access: 25.05.2020]. Acces on the interent: https://vz.ru/about/staff.html.

[8] https://www.ritmeurasia.org/articles--o-proekte-167 [Access: 18.05.2020].

Strategic narratives on the international system spread by the Kremlin administration describe the Western world, along with its institutions (EU, NATO), predominantly as a vanishing and diminishing force suffering from liberal democratic values equated with weakness (Szostek, 2017; Sakwa, 2007). In its opposition to US hegemony Russia has paid more attention to international law, in that it manifests itself as a normative power and portrays Washington as a power that violates the norms of international law. Russia does not claim the status of norm-maker, but wants to create a new normative world order with Western countries divided into spheres of influence which, however, may not always be in line with the political ambitions of the EU and the US (Kuhrt, Feklyunina, 2017). Russia's narratives describe Western institutions primarily as corrupt and in need of reform, which is why Russia supports alternative formats of international cooperation excluding the West (e.g., BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China, Republic of South Africa) (Hinck, Kluver, Cooley, 2018). The Baltic states are in general described as a poor periphery of the West, abandoned by their new hosts and facing serious difficulties after leaving the Soviet bloc, such as economic and social decline. The political strategic narratives constructed by the Kremlin's policymakers emphasize Russia's role as holder of traditional conservative values, rescuing the world from the shackles of liberal ideology in the degenerate Western world (Laruelle, Radvanyi, 2018). In some cases they are more affected by imperial nostalgia for local audiences and alienated public sentiment abroad.

Strategic narratives emphasizing identity present two dominant motives that are strongly emerging: the patriotic image of Russia as a great power and a distinct civilization; and the need to secure Russian society (Kuhrt, Feklyunina, 2017). For Russian propaganda, it is important to emphasize Russia's peculiarity and alternative to the Western political and economic elites so they can easily find common ground with dissatisfied communities in Western countries, something which poses a serious challenge to both Western internal stability and ideological unity in defending liberal democratic values (Kuhrt, Feklyunina, 2017).

Identity-based strategic narratives are often based on a strong opposition between imagined collective identities – Us and Others. At the same time, motives referring to Russophobia in strategic narratives are sympathetic to the politics of the Kremlin (Darczewska, Żochowski, 2015). The term Russophobia has been "used by Russia for both domestic and foreign policy purposes, and historically the Kremlin's elite has concentrated much of the negative flow of information on Russia under the narrative of Russophobia" (Ventsel, Madisson, Hansson, Sazonov, 2018). The popular narrative of the oppression of the Russian-speaking population in the Baltic states tells us they are hated and deprived of many fundamental rights because of their national identity (Lucas, Pomerantsev, 2016).

Very often, Russia's strategic narratives support various theories about the conspiracy of Western civilization against Russia. Conspiracy thinking has been a widely-used political tool to keep society in a single constructed information space since the days of the Russian Empire. During the Soviet era there was the belief that Western countries dreamed of destroying and humiliating the Soviet Union, which was widespread in Soviet society, and such conspiratorial thinking has been transferred to today's Russian Federation (Yablokov, 2018). However, such activities have also been transferred to the post-Soviet space, especially for fuelling regional conflicts and for accusing the West in anti-Russian conspiracies (Mölder, Sazonov, 2019).

The Kremlin-induced information warfare is still very active and uses all possible opportunities. During the global corona crisis Russia's influence operations in the West have

shown no signs of fading. Finnish researcher Saara Jantunen points to a fundamental difference between the Western and Russian influence activities, which makes it for the latter very flexible. In the West, legislation imposes fundamental restrictions on the use of influence in communication by the state and military organizations in target groups, but Russia does not recognize such restrictions i.e, there is no problem (Jantunen, 2018). On 3 February 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that coronavirus is a global threat and since then messages on social media proclaimed it as a new type of biological weapon. Western analysts believe the campaign in social media was launched by President Vladimir Putin personally who has previously claimed that large-scale viral epidemics such as Ebola, bird and swine flu, or now the coronavirus, were developed by American scientists (Broad, 2020). According to the New York Times, this is not surprising as, during his 16-year KGB career in 1975–1991, Vladimir Putin was responsible for, among other things, a campaign accusing the United States of using diseases (more attention was paid to HIV) as biological weapons (Broad, 2020).

Opposition to the West is also one of the main motives for presenting the consequences of the coronavirus, which calls into question the West's ability to cope successfully with the crisis, and is not shy in returning to conspiratorial sources when constructing its strategic narratives. Several US experts refer to Russia's new strategy of producing less fake news itself, but spreading messages produced by others that cause fear and chaos. It is possible that such slippery news is even bought in (Broad, 2020). Pro-Russian social media has been keen to disseminate the allegations of the US conspiracy virus blog Naturalnews.com that coronavirus was engineered by scientists in a laboratory using advances in genetic engineering that have left traces of genetic code that can only be artificially generated. According to the blog, both the American CDC and the WHO are trying to hide the causes of coronavirus because the virus escaped from Chinese biological weapons laboratories, just as the Ebola virus escaped from US laboratories in 1989 (Adams, 2020).

The main goal of Russian influence operations is to spread fear and instability and to increase political and ideological divisions in Europe, the United States and, more broadly, the West (Rutenberg, 2017). Russia's information activities have been remarkably active in promoting their influence all over the world. Videos distributed through the international social channel RT social media YouTube platform accumulate up to a million viewers a day and have been visited four billion times since 2005 (Director of National Intelligence, 2017). RT's strategy is primarily aimed at Russian, English, Spanish and Arabic viewers. They have been successful in the first three languages, while the impact of their Arabic channels has been smaller (Orttung, Nelson, 2018). In 2012 the Internet Research Agency was founded in St. Petersburg. It became a successful trolling company that conducted influential social media campaigns on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and was successful in the United States where their posts reached the computers of tens of millions of social media users (Howard, Ganesh, Liotsiou, Kelly, François, 2018).

Narratives from Russia unequivocally show the role of the Russian Federation as a helper, not the one who needs help. At the height of the corona crisis in Europe in mid-March the Russian Federation attracted the attention of the international media when they, together with the People's Republic of China and Cuba, offered aid to Italy who suffered severely from the Covid-19 crisis. The Russian Federation provided Italy mainly with diagnostic equipment and disinfectants (Prothero, 2020). China, on the other hand, mainly supplied respirators and medical devices (Err.ee, 2020). US analyst Mark Galeotti believes that the main purpose of Russia's assistance was related to its intelligence activities

in order to gather as much information as possible about the Western countries' fight against the virus, and among Russian experts sent to Italy were those involved in intelligence (Err.ee, 2020).

The issue of humanitarian aid was used in influence activities against other European Union member states, from which Estonia did not escape either. At the end of March 2020 the pro-Kremlin media claimed that protective masks that had arrived from China to Tallinn Airport were actually Russian humanitarian aid to Estonia because the protective masks were brought to Tallinn by a plane leased from Russia (Einmann, 2020). Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov told Russia's First TV Channel "Bolshaya Igra" (in Russian "Big game") that many NATO and EU member states would be interested in Russia's assistance in halting COVID-19, but their "big brothers" (leading countries) denied it (Tass.com, 2020). With regard to the aid sent to Italy, Lavrov also claimed that the European Union had refused to help Italy, which led the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte to turn to Russia with the request (Giuffrida, Roth, 2020).

Lavrov intends to convince us that Russia is ready to take responsibility for the functionality of the international system because the countries of the European Union are unable or unwilling to do so. All in all, the nature of Russia's strategic narratives did not change much during the COVID-19 outbreak in Europe. The motive of confrontation with the West remained in the top of strategic objectives, as did the reliance on conspiracy theories in communication. The next chapter deals in more detail with the course of Russia's strategic narratives in information activities during the corona crisis in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

5. STRATEGIC NARRATIVES CONSTRUCTED AND DISSEMINATED BY RUSSIA FOR BALTIC STATES

The Kremlin's official strategic narratives no longer speak about the Baltic states as an integral part of the Russian empire, but they are certainly interested in their connection with Russia's sphere of influence in that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania would possibly become a "window to Europe" allowing Moscow to put constant pressure on Western political institutions such as the European Union and NATO (Radin, 2017; Karlsen, 2019). For this reason, the Putin regime is interested in fostering an unstable region with strong Eurosceptic sentiments.

As follows we take a closer look on political and economic narratives that shape the international system and strategic ambitions of Russia, and anti-Western narratives that emphasize the failure of international organizations (EU, NATO) to cope with the crisis and emphasize the decline of European identity and Western liberal democratic values.

5.1. Political and economic narratives

In the current post-truth environment where information is often constructed according to strategic objectives, the political and economic narratives described above may easily lead to the conclusion that only alignment with the Russian Federation can be the lifeline of the Baltic economy brought to the brink of catastrophe by the spread and quarantine of COVID-19, and that the Western world and its political institutions (EU, NATO) will not help them. Avva claims that the pandemic and its many negative effects are destroying the Latvian economy, whereas Latvia, which is in deep crisis, is not expected to get help or support from the West to overcome the crisis it will have. It is for this reason that Avva

recommends Latvia to change the current strategic goals of its foreign policy and instead to consider a strategic partnership with Russia (Avva, 2020).

> The coronavirus pandemic is a total disaster for the Latvian economy. The potential consequences are such that the development model of this Baltic country has proved completely non-viable. The only way for Latvia to survive in the new conditions is to return to a strategic partnership with Russia (Avva, 2020).

Information manipulations concerning the economic crisis during the pandemic of COVID-19 have played a big role in the dissemination of Russian strategic narratives in the Baltic states (Ivanov, 2020b; Ivanov, 2020a). Krishtal emphasizes the catastrophic state of the Baltic economy after the pandemic and introduces statistics in his attempt to make the article more reliable, arguing, among other things, that the coronavirus pandemic conditionally divided the countries into two groups (Krishtal, 2020): the first includes countries that have the necessary financial airbag to minimize losses from quarantine measures; the second group includes countries whose economies depend on foreign aid and will suffer under the worst effects of the coronavirus. According to Krishtal's narrative the Baltic states belong to the second category, his text being full of expressions like: "... therefore it is even difficult to imagine what predictions will delight Lithuanians sometime later", (Krishtal, 2020) and the information about the Baltic states is presented with a negative undertone and often in sarcastic way.

Some authors portray the Baltic states as an insecure and unstable economic environment that is unable to secure employment for their people and, as a result, emigration has increase (Krugley, 2020). Ivanov argues that Baltic people can no longer find jobs in their home countries. The author also states that, as a result of increased emigration, the Baltic countries will soon be depopulated.

> When at least 500,000 people leave the Baltic states, empty areas appear on the map. It cannot be ruled out that in the near future Eurostat forecasts will be fulfilled, according to which 20 million people will remain in Lithuania, 1.3 million in Latvia and only 1 million in Estonia by 2050 (Ivanov, 2020a).

The article predicts that the demographic situation in the Baltic states has a gloomy future mostly because of economic weakness and the inability to provide jobs for their own people. Russian publications have even compared current emigration from Lithuania to the Stalin era of mass deportations, and refer to Lithuanian politician Romualdas Ozolas (1939–2015), arguing that 60,000 Lithuanians per year are leaving the country, while between 1941 and 1952 about 130,000 people were deported from Lithuania and another 150,000 were placed in Gulag prison camps (Ivanov, 2020a). Russian propaganda channels also paint the situation in Estonia and Latvia quite negatively, pointing out that the unemployment rate in these countries may soon increase in many important sectors of the economy.

5.2. Anti-western narratives

Opposition to the Western world and its liberal democratic values is becoming a part of Russia's identity-based strategic narratives. Recently, the "war of narratives" has become an increasingly influential political-strategic game in which mental constructions by which

people perceive each other follow specific emotional patterns, often expressed in permanently fighting opposing identities, or virtual wars between the identity of "Us" and the identity of "Others" (Mölder, 2016).

The global corona crisis dealt a major blow to international cooperation, including the European Union's cooperation in managing the crisis which was launched much later when national protection measures were put in place. Despite the agreement on the Schengen common visa area, to which a large number of European Union Member States have acceded, the spontaneous closure of Member States' borders began immediately, a move which was not coordinated with other Member States. The threat of the virus was largely ignored in January and February before the crisis had reached its peak when it would have been much more effective to fight against it (Parts, 2020). However, the chaotic actions taken in implementing joint action showed the European Union's lack of interoperability, offering Russia and other competitive powers interested in weakening Europe an easy opportunity to launch a propaganda war.

Russian media outlets often claim that coronavirus destroys the unity and interoperability of the EU, with the help of governments and the political establishment in EU member states that are carrying out destructive and unconstructive policies (See e.g. Armazanova, 2020; Inosmi.ru, 2020; Baltnews.ee, 2020; RuBaltic.ru, 2020; Krugley, 2020; Petrinis, 2020).

Petrinis notes that the impact of the coronavirus in Europe is very tragic, as it has shown Europe's weakness, instability, unsustainability and lack of solidarity, which have directly affected the Russian Federation's strategic narratives about the EU as a failed utopian project. The author predicts decentralization, disintegration and disappearance of the EU, that Europe will return to a past in which fragmented nation-states competed and fought with each other (Petrinis, 2020).

> Before the virus "bubble" burst, the European Union, led by French President Emmanuel Macron, seemed to be moving slowly but steadily towards the European federation. Disputes between the EU and the US facilitated this process in particular (the latest example of "friendship" was Donald Trump's decision to close America to the people of Europe without any agreement with its "partners"). Then the coronavirus struck, and the fight against it represents an ideal opportunity for the emergence of real political and institutional leaders. In other words, the EU as an institution and strong supporters of its federalisation could use this "ideal storm" to strengthen Brussels' role. But the result has been quite the opposite (Petrinis, 2020).

On 16 April 2020 *Inosmi.ru* published an article by US paleoconservative ideologue Patrick Joseph Buchanan claiming that the imposition of quarantine will cause a major economic depression around the whole world. The editorial commentary on Buchanan's article wonders that, if Estonia is seriously struggling with a pandemic affecting 1–3% of the population, how is it expected to cope with Russia's imminent nuclear war? According to the editors, Estonia is advised to pay more attention to preserving the country's economy than to threats posed by Russia. Buchanan discusses the value of human life and is concerned about the United States' response to the pandemic of COVID-19, asking if anyone believes that a country collapsed by the coronavirus is ready to fight a nuclear war

that could kill millions and compete with Russia for influence over the Baltic states or with China for control over the South-China sea (Buchanan, 2020).

Russophobia has been strongly emphasized by Kremlin-orchestrated information campaigns, according to which all political forces that do not approve of the policies of the Putin administration are suspected of spreading anti-Russian sentiment (Ventsel, Hansson, Maidsson, Sazonov, 2019; Darczewska, Żochowski, 2015; Feklyunina, 2013). The main message of such a narrative underlines that the Baltic states simultaneously hate and are afraid of Russia; they hate everything about Russians, the Russian language, Russian history, and Russian culture. The Kremlin has used Russophobia as a strategic incentive in influence operations against the Baltic states for decades by referring to conflicting identities, which has been one of the favourite strategic narrative motifs constructed by Russia (Baranov, Afonina, 2016; Nikolayev, 2020; Pyh, 2020; Baburin, 2020; Vinnikov, 2020).

> It seems as if there is no news in the world nowadays other than overviews of the battle against the coronavirus, but Estonian hurray patriots can find a trace of the Russian threat in them as well. They were offended by the fact that Russian planes brought medical masks from China to Tallinn … Inner feelings, if they are precious to you, need to be supported by deeds, it's like a fire in a fireplace - if you don't add bad, the flame goes out. All that remains is ash, decay, darkness, cold ... a terrible story. Those in love understand this better than drug addicts, for whom a day or two without a stimulating dose is literally painful, and the mere thought of abstinence causes tremors. This somewhat flashy introduction is only necessary to understand the Estonian Russophob, who lives, breathes and feeds on hatred against Russia in both literal and figurative terms (Nikolayev, 2020).

Playing on identity issues belongs to the traditional model of Russian information activities and influence operations that seek to capture nations living in the Baltic states, targeting the feelings and integrity of the Russophone audience. With their influence operations, the Kremlin not only seeks to consolidate the citizens in its own country under policies manifested by the Putin administration, but also to increase its influence in Eastern Europe, including the Baltic states, Ukraine and, more broadly, the post-Soviet space.

6. CONCLUSION

According to the sample of analysed articles published in the pro-Kremlin media from March until May 2020, strategic narratives created by the Russian Federation for the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) may emphasize:

- motives to disrupt the international system and Western political institutions (e.g. NATO, EU) with the Baltic membership;
- political and economic motives related to the policies of governments of Baltic states;
- motives indicating conflictual identities between Russian and Baltic nations, which have been often placed in a Russophobic context (with purpose to influence local Russophone community in Baltic states).

These motives reflect the Kremlin's strategic objectives which aim to destroy the unity of Western alliances and to increase ideological fragmentation in the European Union. The Baltic states have become an important and vulnerable target of influence operations

conducted by the Moscow and pro-Kremlin forces, given the widespread use of the Russian language and the significant size of the Russian-speaking population permanently resides in Baltic states.

According to the sample of articles published in the Russian media, the message sent attempts to convince the audience that the Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian economies depend on future assistance from abroad to restore their pre-crisis economic standards, but that the EU is not interested or able to assist them. The Baltic governments have often shown incompetence in managing the crisis and after the crisis they may face fading economies, a high rate of unemployment and increasing emigration from the Baltic states. Russophobic motives attributed by Kremlin propaganda to the Baltic states have also been discussed in the researched Russian and pro-Russian media outlets. During the outbreak and spread of COVID-19, these articles have incited distrust against the Baltic governments, civil society organizations and the concept of Western liberal democracy and its institutions (e.g., NATO, EU). Propagandistic messages from Russia sought to show the lack of cooperation, incompetent management and lack of sustainability that appeared in the Baltic states during the COVID-19 crisis. Russian strategic objectives in the Baltics during COVID-19 do not differ significantly from their strategic goals in the last two decades. This study does not expect any significant change in narratives spread by Russian influence operations in the near future.

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