BALTIC STATES AND THE ZAPAD 2017 EXERCISE IN THE WESTERN MEDIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR SMALL STATE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Every now and then, somewhere in the world events take place that are regarded as having International news value. Nowadays, it is easy to become a mediated observer and to have an opinion about something that happens on the other side of the world. In September 2017, the Russian Federation's Zapad military exercise was an event which gained widespread media attention on an international scale. It brought unusually large media coverage to the Baltic States due to their geographic closeness to the exercise area and the fact that the Russian Federation is their most important security threat. The study researches the messages that spread in Western online news media which have a strong potential to influence the perception of the Baltic States among the allies and their societies at large. The aim of this study is to examine how the Baltic States were presented in the Western media in the context of the Zapad-2017 excercise and indicate lessons for strategic communication.

INTRODUCTION

The three small Baltic States share the same main security threats (Veebel, 2018; Vaicekauskaitė, 2018; Bailes, 2013) and the most important of those is the threat from the east, from the Russian Federation. EU and NATO membership has not completely eradicated the security concerns of the Baltic States and the identity of the region has been largely influenced by Russia (Jurkynas, 2007, p. 166). That is the main reason why the Zapad-2017 military exercise brought widespread media attention to the area, and brought along a worldwide discussion about the Russian Federation's threat to the region and to the Baltic States.

Naveh (2005) explains that when it comes to international events, the selection of events and the way they are presented are often influenced by the international political agenda. It is obvious that all states do not get a similar amount of attention and if a small state is presented, it is possible that they play an important part in a great power's interests (Bennet & Paletz, 1994, pp 31; Wanta, Golan & Lee, 2004). Therefore, the media and politics have a two-way relationship: the political agenda influences what is regarded as important and the media has a role in making these events important.

Therefore, the image of a small state is of strategic importance as their security depends largely upon collective defence strategies. To find out what can be learned from the media coverage of the Zapad military excercise in 2017, the research problem of this study was formulated:

How were the Baltic States presented in the Western media in 2017 in the context of the Zapad exercise?

The Baltic States are small states on the periphery of Europe, which is why the support of allies and the confidence that they will not be left alone in dangerous situations is critical. Exploring the ways in which the Baltic countries were presented in the Western media may point to their current relationship with the allies and security, knowing which steps can be taken in strategic communication to support the image of small states in the desired direction.

1. BEING SMALL IN A CHANGING SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

To this day, there is no clear definition to what constitutes a small state. Thorhallsson and Steinsson (2017) argue that small states could be defined based on the combination of resources and capabilities, especially lack of those which define the extent of their power and influence. From this point of view, small states could be defined based on different quantitative indicators – size of its population, territory, economy (GDP) or its military (Ingebritsen, Neumann & Gstöhl, 2004; Antola, 2002, pp 71). It is obvious that small states' physical resources such as economic wealth, military power, etc. are limited, making them usually the weak actor in international relations.

However, the understanding of the security environment has changed rapidly during the last decades. Realism as a theoretical approach, which dominated decades ago is not capable of explaining the changes in the field today. The emergence of informational, cultural and social factors and their increasing importance is the main reason this study emanates from the constructivist perspective, which emphasizes the importance of ideas, identity and interaction (Agius, 2016, pp 50). Nowadays, security and defence are often seen as social constructs that are influenced by the social, historical and political context.

Fox (2006, pp 40) argues that as big states are usually special due to their great military power, achieving objectives through violence is only one measure of political power. She describes other ways to gain success, which are ideological and diplomatic measures that help to strengthen small states and keep good relations with selected allies (Fox, 2006, pp 40). Thorhallsson and Steinsson (2017) agree with that view saying that small states can compensate the shortages that their smallness causes by choosing the right strategies. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss whether these environmental changes offer new opportunities and give more power to small states. Security and defence have become a very broad study area (Bailes & Rickli, 2014), reaching out from the boundaries of traditional security and defence measures.

The three Baltic states share a border with the Russian Federation, which is regarded to be the greatest threat to their independence (Veebel, 2018; Vaicekauskaitė, 2018; Bailes, 2013). When it comes to the identity, culture and history of the three Baltic States, it is not surprising that they have a mutually shared understanding of the Russian Federation being a threat to the region. It is obvious that the Russian Federation's Zapad-2017 military exercise was aimed at sending a communicative message. The same was intended by the NATO alliance who were actively present in the Baltics and other states in the area that were meant to deter its adversary.

1.1. PURPOSEFUL STRATEGY AND PURPOSEFUL COMMUNICATION

Before discussing the aspects that make a communication strategic, it is crucial to discuss what a strategy actually is. As the security environment changes, there is a need to adapt the strategic thinking to suit the new conditions. Bailes (2009) explains that strategy provides the starting point or foundation from which more detailed, local, and often more flexible 'tactical' actions can proceed. But as the security environment changes and becomes much broader than usual (by combining social, cultural and informational aspects as well), the strategies need to look beyond their traditional borders. When it comes to the public sector, Geoff Mulgan (2009) writes that effective strategies must relate to every part of society. Strategies that belong only to ministries, management, or the strategy unit are doomed to fail. Just like strategies of one function (eg, finance or IT) (Mulgan, 2009, p. 4). Cornish (2011) notes that effective strategic communication cannot be achieved through a solid, discrete, centralised structure, or through any strategic communications department. Success requires a common strategic communication mindset, which should be integrated at all levels: state's strategy, national policy, organisation and department. Therefore, developing a strategic communication mindset and agile network-based approach can be seen as a challenge for states. And here, small administrations could have an advantage.

There are different strategies that small states can choose to secure their existence. Long (2016) defines three strategies that help states to increase their influence:

- **Particular-intrinsic power** considers the means that are intrinsic to the state. For example Bailes (2009) writes about national power and authority, which could be based on some niche-knowledge. This kind of knowledge makes a state valuable to its allies, it helps to collect know-how and increase competence in some field (Bailes, 2009). When a state has a niche-knowledge, it is a deep expertise in some field that is increasingly important to other countries and not easy to replace. Achieving this expertise usually takes investments and resources, therefore it has to be a strategic choice of a state. Due to the lack of diplomatic resources, lack of expertise and consolidation of structural power, small states should focus on the policy sectors that are important to them or where they are most likely to benefit (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017).

- **Collective power** means the relationships with allies. This means that partnerships with international organisations, big or other small states could help to have an impact that is too difficult for one small state to achieve. Bailes (2009) sees two main strategic directions – partnership with a powerful country or partnership with group(s) that have collective power and influence. In the case of the Baltic States, deterrence activities are closely linked to NATO. Viljar Veebel (2018), a research fellow at the Baltic Defense College explains that since NATO's common strategy is deterrence, it should be reflected in its strategic communications. It gives Baltic States a chance to communicate themselves as a part of a strong alliance and therefore it is in the interest of small states that NATO would seem strong.

The influence and security of small states in the international system can also be enhanced by cooperation with "like-minded" or other small states (Bailes, 2009; Jurkynas, 2007). Cooperation with neighbors can change the country's image and mitigate the effect of smallness, as well as ensure that the special interests of small countries are not ignored (Jurkynas, 2007). At the same time, Thorhallsson and Steinsson (2017) point out that sometimes small countries may have different interests, which makes it difficult to form alliances with each other to balance big powers. Vaicekauskaitė (2017) agrees with this statement and points out that small countries may have similar characteristics, but this does not mean that they share similar foreign policy interests. However, it is also known that the Baltic States share

security threats (Veebel, 2018; Vaicekauskaitė, 2018; Bailes, 2013), which should make their cooperation successful.

- **Derivative power** (Long, 2016) includes infomational activities such as campaigns and lobbying, and strategic communication could be seen as a measure of derivative power. Handel (2006, lk 190) explains that derivative power can be seen as a way for a weak state to achieve its objectives by manipulating the strong powers. He says that weak states are dependent on attraction to other states. That is why he thinks it's the most dangerous for a small state to be isolated from the international system or to get involved in a power-play with a powerful country that could preclude its relationships and interaction with other states (Handel, 2006, lk 190).

There is much that a small state could do to support its chosen path by strategic communication, and therefore increase its derivative power. Thorhallsson and Steinsson (2017) addressed the importance of the image of a small country in its security. They argue that the small country benefits from a neutral and peaceful image. Likewise, small countries can increase soft power through their attractive culture and values. Soft power is the ability of a state to make others want what it wants through temptation and seduction (Nye, 2004). This is particularly important for a small country that is unable to compete with the great powers by means of 'hard power'. However, this appeal is enhanced by the media, which helps to convey these values globally and contributes to the formation of other societies' perceptions of the country.

Therefore, achieving the desired image and reaching a common understanding requires effort from the small state itself, because meaning cannot be created without communication (co-construction of meaning) (Benoit et al., 2015, p. 7). These days journalists have limitations of time and amount of content, which means they have to find the events with the most news value and present them through certain journalistic norms (Ayalon, Popovich & Yarchi, 2016). But it can be argued that state's spokepersons' own messages are one of these bits of information that help to formulate the outcome.

2. ZAPAD AS A PHENOMENA OF INTERNATIONAL NEWS VALUE

From time to time, there are events that bring more international media attention to the Baltic States. One of those was the Russian Federation's Zapad-2017 military exercise. Zapad military excercises date back to the cold war when it was first conducted as a cooperation between the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact members. It is one of four military excercises which the Russian Federation conducts in a cycle of four years in four strategic areas: Zapad exercise in the west district, Vostok in the east, Kavkaz in the south and Tsentr in the north (Sazonov & Ventsel, 2018; Stoicescu, 2017; Heuser, et al., 2018, lk 5; Wilk, 2017).

According to Suhhankin (2017), four main conclusions can be made based on the surface of Zapad, one of which was the use of the exercise as an information weapon. He acknowledges that the Russian Federation achieved its main propagandistic objective already before the beginning of Zapad-2017, because it's skilful information manipulation and distortion made it possible to sow the doubts that spread panic in the West (Suhhankin, 2017). Ventsel et al. (2018a) argue that two functions can be distinguished when it comes to spreading fear in the information environment. First, it was intended to create „information fog", which aimed to create confusion among the audience. This was done by manipulative and vague messages, opaque data and attempts to ridicule the West's speculations regarding the size of the Zapad exercise. Constant repetition of such messages led the media to believe that the Russian Federation was hiding its true military capability. The second function aimed at convincing the audience that the Western media (EU and NATO spokepersons) were the ones spreading fear and paranoia and were the generators of such information hazards. They conclude that Russia succeeded in creating an image of a dreaded and militant enemy in the Western media, and the resulting sense of danger in turn reproduced the discourse on Russian military power. (Ventsel, et al., 2018a)

Zapad-2017 gave an opportunity to study the ways the Baltic States were presented in the Western media and see what could be learned from the messages that were presented in the media reports in the Western online

news media. The aim of this study was to examine how the Baltic States were presented in the Western media in the context of the Zapad-2017 excercise and indicate lessons for strategic communication. The research problem was formulated:

How were the Baltic States presented in the Western media in 2017 in the context of the Zapad exercise?

To find an answer to this research problem, three research questions were posed:

1. What was the main content of the messages presented in Western online media about the Baltic States and, as a result, the overall image of the Baltic States?

2. How did the Baltic States' messages influence this image?

3. What were the main lessons for the Baltic States in terms of strategic communication?

Therefore, this study attempts to detect the link between the states' strategic communication activities and their outcome in the media. To find an answer to this question, qualitative content analysis of media texts from nine online news portals were used.

3. QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS AND SELECTION OF ARTICLES

In this study, a qualitative content analysis was used as a data analysis method. A qualitative approach enables a phenomenon to be described, to understand the processes within it, show the different views, motivations and experiences of the participants and explain the meaning attached to these experiences (Forman & Damschroder, 2007). Qualitative text analysis is a form of analysis in which understanding and interpreting text plays a much larger role than in classical content analysis, which is limited to listing "visible" content (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 33). It explores aspects of the texts that quantitative analytical techniques do not reach. Kuckartz (2014, pp. 30-32) sees quantitative analysis as an important part of qualitative analysis rather than an alternative to it, and therefore quantitative analysis can be considered as the first step of qualitative analysis.

Media texts from nine Western news media online portals were studied: Reuters, The Guardian, Politico, BBC, Bloomberg, EU Observer, Foreign Policy, The New York Times and The Washington Post. These were chosen as they are widely spread and based in the United States, UK or Brussels, which can be regarded as having an important connection to the Baltic States' allies and security. First, the articles were searched with the keyword „Zapad" and 174 results were found. Then, articles which mentioned the Baltic States, the region or one of these states were mapped. The total number of analysed articles was 96 and these were published in 2017 between February 9th and December 27th.

Then, three phases were used in the coding process: immersion, reduction and interpretation (Forman & Damschroder, 2007). In the first step, the researcher read and examined the research material and got an overview of the "whole" before organising it into the units. In the second phase, a systematic approach to data processing was developed. The most important analysis units were picked and organised regarding the research question. The study used both deductive and inductive categories. The analysis units of the study were the paragraphs of the media

texts that mentioned the Baltic States. These units were assigned to five categories:

- **Messages assigned to the Baltic States**, which included four separate sub-categories (Baltic States, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania). A distinction was made here between the comments of the "spokepersons" of these countries and the presentation of each individual country. Spokepersons are people who are quoted (regardless of their role) or attributed views (such as "person said" or "person thought") in web texts.

- **The Baltic States' context**. Studies how the Baltic States were described without referring to any country's messages. As the paper explores ways of presenting the Baltic States, the reactions and actions attributed to them were also taken into account.

- **Security environment affecting the Baltic countries.** This category contained both deductive and inductive codes. The aim was to find out to what extent some aspects of the theory (including deterrence, unity) were presented in these presentations. However, it was not limited to deductive subcategories and codes, since for the purpose of the research it was necessary to identify other aspects that were presented in the media texts.

- **Zapad 2017**. The description of the major exercise was grouped into one category. This category was chosen because many speculations about Zapad's possible consequences and the aims of the event were spread in the studied texts.

- **Other context**. The fourth category contained parts of the broader context which were not directly related to the Baltic States and as such were not analysed in depth.

At this stage, an initial coding guide with deductive categories, subcategories and codes was developed. This coding guide was developed by analysing 27 articles (3 articles from each portal) and inductive codes were added. After that, all the articles were coded by the final coding guide.

The last phase involved analysing, interpreting, and synthesizing code reports and memos to complete the results. Afterwards, the patterns

that emerged during the analysis were explained, noteworthy results highlighted, and placed in the theoretical framework. The Nvivo 11 Pro qualitative data analysis programme was used to conduct the analysis.

4. ESTONIA, LATVIA AND LITHUANIA IN THE WESTERN ONLINE NEWS MEDIA

4.1 RESULTS

The Baltic States were named in 96 articles and these texts were the objects of this analysis. In total, 174 articles mentioned Zapad, and the Baltic States were presented in more than a half of these texts. The analysed texts were published in 2017 between February 9th and December 27th. As expected, most media texts were released in September 2017. During the Zapad event alone (14.09.2017-20.09.2017) 21 media texts were published. It is one more than after the event (21.09-27.12.2017). The media interest grew in July and decreased signficantly after November 2017. The first analysed media text was published in February 2017 after which the media interest grew gradually. As it can be seen from the following table, most of the texts were published before Zapad (09.02-13.09.2017).

TABLE 1. The number of analysed media texts by publication and period

Portal	Before Zapad	During Zapad	After Zapad	Total
Reuters	25	4	6	35
The Guardian	6	2	0	8
Politico	6	2	3	11
BBC	1	3	0	4
Bloomberg	1	1	2	4
EU Observer	6	1	1	8
Foreign Policy	5	1	3	9
The New York Times	3	2	1	6
The Washington Post	2	5	4	11
Total	**55**	**21**	**20**	**96**

Most of the articles (35) were from the Reuters online portal. This was followed by Politico and The Washington Post, each of which published 11 articles on the Zapad exercise that mentioned the Baltic States.

Of the **Estonian** spokespersons, the defence ministers were quoted the most: in 6 articles in total. Five of the quotes belonged to Margus Tsahkna (Estonian Minister of Defense from 11.2016 to 06.2017), one to Jüri Luik (Estonian Minister of Defense from 06.2017). The comments of Prime Minister Jüri Ratas were published in 3 articles, while the other spokesmen were included in one article, including Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defense Kristjan Prikk, and Commanders of the Defense Forces at the time Riho Terras and Hannes Hanso. One article in The Guardian presented the assessments of civilians and four people explained the situation. On one occasion, the comments of Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves were also published. Estonia was mostly mentioned in connection with the presence of allied forces in the area (8 texts) and international events (7 texts). The two largely overlapped: allies' representatives' visits to Estonia on several occasions, which involved visiting troops that were located in Estonia (Jens Stoltenberg visiting British troops, Florence Parly visiting French troops). Estonia's (and Lithuania's) participation in the Aurora exercise was also noted.

Latvia was presented mostly in two contexts: as a state in the Zapad region (with Lithuania) and hybrid threats. Comments of Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs were presented in six articles, which focused mainly on the elements of hybrid warfare. Statements of the Latvian Minister of Defense Janis Garisons were presented on two occasions, which focused on Russia's overall ability to wage a hybrid war with the West. In addition, Vice Chairman of the National Security Committee of the Latvian Parliament Karlis Serzants and President Raimonds Vejonis were quoted each in one article. On one occasion, an impersonal reference was made to Latvian security officials and three civilians' opinions were asked about Zapad.

Of the three Baltic countries, **Lithuania** was the most represented in the Western media in the Zapad context. An analysis of the messages from Lithuanian officials revealed that two persons - or the Lithuanian Defense Minister Raimundas Karoblis and President Dalia Grybauskaite – were presented the most. Lithuanian Minister of Defense Raimundas Karoblis quotes were used in 7 articles, stressing the potential for conflict and referring to Zapad's offensive nature. He clearly emphasized expectations for the allies' response and often referred to unity. President Dalia Grybauskaite was quoted in five articles and one interview. She

also saw Zapad as an offensive exercise against its neighbors, which was a consistent message of the other Baltic States and their allies. The President often referred to unity and called on NATO to use additional security measures in the region. The quotes of the Lithuanian Minister of the Interior Eimutis Misiunas appeared in two articles in which he explained the construction of the Lithuanian border. In addition, the following people were presented: Commander of the Lithuanian Land Forces Maj Gen Valdemaras Rupšys, Vice-Minister of National Defence Vytautas Umbrasas, Head of the Liberal Movement in the Lithuanian Parliament Eugenijus Gentvilas, Spokesman for the Lithuanian Border Guard Service Rokas Pukinsas and Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Antanas Linkevicius. Their quotes were each featured in a single article.

4.2 DISCUSSION

As stated in the last chaphter, three research questions were formulated. The overview of the main findings are presented regarding each of these research questions.

The first research question was: *What was the main content of the messages presented in the Western online media about the Baltic States and, as a result, the overall image of the Baltic States?*

Over a third of all articles had messages indicating to deterrence and/or unity of the Western alliance. There is a thin line between deterrence and unity, but in this study, military steps were regarded as a deterrence and unity was described by words and opinions regarding the allies' actions, plans and promises. It can be said that Zapad-2017 was taken seriously by NATO and the US, counteractions were described in the media during the whole year, not only during the period of the Zapad exercise. This shows an effort to show themselves as active and prepared actors.

The Baltic States were presented in the Western media as small states that are strongly supported by the NATO alliance and the United States, and who cooperate actively with other western states. As mentioned previously, international cooperation helps to relieve the small state effect and different forms of cooperation were often presented in media texts.

Article 5, which refers to the collective defence, and allies' presence in the Baltics (e.g international drills, visits, events) were often mentioned:

> „U.S. Vice President Mike Pence on Monday assured the Baltic states of U.S. support if they faced aggression from Russia, telling them that Washington firmly backs NATO's doctrine of collective defense." (Reuters, 31.07.2017)

Although the Baltic States were strongly indicated as partners and part of an alliance, the Russian Federation was presented as a threat to the Baltics which has previously interfered and will probably do so in the future. Mostly the threat was explained through its previous actions in Ukraine and Crimea. It is important to note that this can be misleading as it indicates that a similar scenario could happen to the Baltic States. It should be kept in mind that the security environment of these countries is different, perhaps the most obvious would be membership of the NATO alliance. Also, the Russian Federation's activities against the Baltic States were mentioned, which supported the Baltic concerns during the exercise period. Some of the media texts mentioned the Baltic States as border states or previous Soviet states and their history was briefly presented. Briefing the audience about the history of the Baltic States and their relationships with the Russian Federation and Soviet Union could support the mutual understanding of the Russian Federation as the main security threat to Baltic States. For example, when discussing the situation of Estonia, Politico stated:

> „Situated across a 200-mile long border with Russia, Estonia — invaded by the Soviet Union in World War II and occupied for 70 years — is seen by strategists as a likely target for Russian aggression that could test the NATO alliance" (Politico, 29.07.2017)

As mentioned previously, the Russian Federation's skillful information manipulation lead to doubts which spread panic in the West. Analysing media texts lead to the conclusion that many different scenarios spread about the possible outcome of the exercise. On one hand it could be seen as spreading doubts and fear. On the other hand, it could help to conduct deterrence activities: discussing different possible outcomes means that there are fewer opportunities for the adversary to suprise. Mostly, it was suspected that the Russian Federation would leave military equipment

and troops in the area (without discussing where this could lead). For example, the Lithuanian defence minister at the time Raimundas Karoblis explained the situation:

> „Lithuania's defence minister, Raimundas Karoblis, suggested there was even a risk of the drill triggering a conflict or being used as cover to leave behind troops in Belarus. "We can't be totally calm. There is a large foreign army massed next to Lithuanian territory," he told Reuters." (Reuters, 13.09.2017)

Also, some of the Baltic weak spots were mentioned (Suwalki corridor, big Russian-speaking minorities). It could be regarded positive to the Baltic States that potential misbehaviour by the Russian Federation was mainly mentioned by indicating to its previous actions not as an outcome of a weakness of the small Baltic States. Some of the weaknesses of the Baltic States were mentioned, such as a need for an airforce or the possibility to influence russian minorities. Also, the need for additional forces was strongly suggested by Lithuanian spokepersons, which on one side could influence the alliance to bring its forces to the area, but just as well show the Baltics as small states in need. It is clear that chosen communication activities should consider both sides and aim towards the outcomes that are strategically more beneficial and important at some point in time.

All in all, there was no doubt that the Baltic States were seen as part of the alliance, but it would be crucial that the whole alliance was presented as strong and united. That's where some of the Baltic messages could be improved. Indicating to NATO as to a third party who makes decisions and who is hoped to bring forces to the eastern front could send a message that these topics haven't been agreed upon yet. Also, some „what if..." scenarios were presented which discussed the outcomes of a real attack and the alliance's potential inability to actually react in the event of a real attack. However, these discussions remained hypothetical and it can be regarded as a part of the information environment, which is not controlled by any state or alliance itself.

The second research question was: *How did the Baltic States' messages influence this image?*

The three Baltic States were presented in the Western media in different ways. It is understandable, as although small states have many similar qualities, they often pursue different interests and objectives. Messages of all three supported the presentation of the Baltic States being a part of NATO. However, each of the Baltic States messages had a different focus and way of expression. It should be pointed out that this article is concerned with media presentations, not the states' actual strategies and aims. This means that these presentations were shaped by journalistic interpretations.

Estonia's possible objective was to present itself as a calm and rational small state. This was pursued by very straightforward and clear messages, which were mostly free of emotions and very similar to the messages of the alliance:

> „The prime minister of Estonia, Jüri Ratas, who joined Stoltenberg at the base in Tapa [--]said: "I would like to say that we are concerned about the nature and lack of transparency of the exercise. Our attitude remains cool and confident. Along with our allies we will monitor the exercise very closely and remain ready for every situation." (The Guardian, 06.09.2017)

With only few exeptions, Estonia's spokepersons remained calm and did not speculate over possible scenarios (except the possibility of the Russian Federation leaving its troops in the area). Estonia's spokepersons focused on observing the drill and being prepared in case any dangerous events should take place. Just like other Baltic States, Estonia's spokepersons indicated the need for the allies presence in the area and these expectations were explained to be „a logical step" regarding the previous cooperation and today's security environment without indicating their own weaknesses, as Estonia's defence minister at that time, Jüri Luik explained:

> "Similar to having an armored British battalion here, it would be equally logical to have anti-aircraft assets," Luik, a 50-year-old career diplomat, said in an interview in the capital, Tallinn. "It doesn't add any drama. It's rather just an element of deterrence." (Bloomberg, 13.07.2017)

Latvia's spokepersons strongly focused on different hybrid threats. Just as explained earlier, focusing on a niche-topic could increase a small states soft power in the international arena as it gives a chance to raise its competences and know-how on some important topic, and makes a small state more „useful" to its alliances. There were comments that pointed out the the Russian Federation's activities in hybrid warfare (e.g disturbing phone lines or spreading fake news). As was said in the statement of Latvia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

> „During the Zapad 2017 exercise, we cannot rule out activities involving hybrid threats directed against the Baltic States, including aggressive propaganda and fake news, manipulations with public opinion, cyber-attacks and others." (Politico, 12.09.2017)

It can be said that the niche of hybrid threat suits the overall context well. Latvia's spokepersons sometimes presented their ideas vaguely and at times they weren't based on official statements:

> „„Our authorities are analysing a pattern of communications disruption that appears to have originated during the Zapad exercise against Öland Island, with some direct impact to Latvia," Rinkevics said. [--] Rinkevics said Latvian authorities are also examining possible Russian involvement in a Sept. 13 outage of Latvia's emergency phone hotline. Nothing has yet been proved, he said." (The Washington Post, 05.10.2017)

As pointed out earlier, during risky situations it is important to keep messages clear and well grounded, and to avoid them being stated too early (not agreed upon with allies or without having an official confirmation).

Lithuania can be regarded as very clear in its messages. As from the Baltic States Lihtuania was geographically the closest to the area of the exercise, Lithuania also expressed the greatest need for allies to be present in the region:

> „Lithuanian president Dalia Grybauskaite has urged Nato to beef up security in its Baltic allies ahead of a mass-scale Russian drill in September that is to simulate an invasion. "We are worried about the upcoming Zapad 2017 exercise, which will deploy a very large and

aggressive force [on our borders] that will very demonstrably be preparing for a war with the West," she said in Riga on Friday, Reuters reports." (EU Observer, 10.02.2017)

Lithuanian speakers discussed the most likely results of Zapad from the other Baltic countries, sometimes highlighting the weaknesses of the Baltic countries and expressed their dependence on allies. The speeches of the Lithuanian speakers sometimes gave the impression that NATO is being spoken of as a third party, which could indicate the country's exclusion from decision-making processes or its inability to contribute to joint decision-making:

> „„We expect so," defense minister Raimundas Karoblis told Reuters when asked if he saw an agreement shaping up for the NATO summit in 2018. "Air defense is one of the issues which we need to address. We also need to look at other domains, like NATO command structure reform, we need to move forward on all of these aspects," he said, also calling for NATO to strengthen maritime defenses in the Baltics. [--] Karoblis said exercises should be considered by NATO after Russia's Zapad war games unnerved the West in September." (Reuters, 07.11.2017)

In general, it can be argued that the communication strategy chosen by Lithuania demonstrated the effectiveness of the strategic communication process and its messages contributed most to the general Baltic States' image. At the same time, this study can not make any definite conclusions because this study does not establish a cause-effect relationship between what was intended and what was presented in the information environment.

The third reserach question was: *What were the main lessons for the Baltic States in terms of strategic communication?*

The study provided an overview of the presentation of the Baltic States in the Western media in the context of the Russian Federation's military exercise Zapad-2017. Also, it was discussed how the messages of the three Baltic States spokepersons' contributed to these presentations. Based on the theoretical and empirical parts of this study, there are some aspects

that could be regarded important in organising and carrying out strategic communication in a small state.

First and foremost, there is a need to **know your adversary**. The deep knowledge of the adversary is important for multiple reasons. Perhaps the most important one is to coordinate one's messages in a way they would not contribute to the achievement of your opponent's goals. For example, the Russian Federation's objective is to be regarded as a threat and it wants to be seen as strong and dangerous. Therefore, the Baltic States should try not to frame the Russian Federation *this way*, but perhaps frame its actions through its dishonest behaviour instead. On the other hand, explaining the Baltic States' relationship with the Russian Federation and it's behaviour could improve allies' mutual understanding about the state as a security threat.

It is not always possible nor necessary to avoid talking about small states' weaknesses. However, discussing different voids in defence could make a small state seem weak and needy. Instead, it would be beneficial to **concentrate on your strengths** and the ways it deals with different security threats. This could send a message that a small state is actively preparing for risks that its environment provides and it is a strong partner to other states in the alliance. As discussed previously, although small states may be considered weak regarding traditional means of war, these are not the only important aspects in the changing security environment. As seen from the analysis of the media texts, worrying about weaknesses could lead to the journalistic interpretation of negative emotions (fear, concern, anxiety) which contradicted the messages of the NATO alliance, which tried to sound calm and confident.

The study presented that NATO's main messages included being **confident, but prepared**. To contribute to the unity of the alliance, the small states should keep these attributes as a part of their messages as well. This helps to frame themselves as part of a strong alliance.

As discussed before, the general security environment is changing and the problems that the states face have become wicked. Therefore, there is a need to lose the traditional boundaries between different institutions because there are increasing number of topics that can be regarded important in a state's defence and security. There is an ineluctable need to

coordinate strategic communication as a network. In order to respond to modern challenges, successful strategic communication needs to move beyond existing silos. As pointed out previously, effective strategies must relate to every part of society. Strategies that belong only to ministries, management, or the strategy unit are doomed to fail. Just like strategies where only one function dominates (eg, finance or IT). It could be necessary to develop a strategic communication mindset across state institutions that would help public institutions network and strengthen the state's position in each key area. There is a need for this network-based approach to become international, especially for a small state.

It could become helpful to **prioritise the main messages between the Baltic States.** Obviously, three small states may have different strategies, but the objective is usually the same – to keep the region safe. Repeating and emphasising the most important messages increases the probability of them being represented in the media. When these messages are expressed simply, they are better understood and more often reused in media texts.

If possible, the Baltic States should find a common **niche-knowledge** that could be supported by strategic communication and would help them to increase their power on the international stage. Although, generally it should be considered thoroughly whether the context is right to communicate a niche topic. Hybrid threats as a niche may have suited well to the Zapad context, but forcing the niche-related messages can contribute to the creation of information fog, which could make it harder to achieve goals set with communication activities. Also, it should be kept in mind that the niche-topic is something that the state has a strong competence and knowledge in. This means that raising the expertise presupposes investment of time and resources, therefore should be chosen strategically.

And last but not least, it is crucial to **prepare early** for events like Zapad-2017. Media interest towards the exercise could be seen in the beginning of the year. It would be much easier to agree upon messages and forming them to suit the state's strategic objectives when it is done in a timely manner.

All in all, the small states should contribute to improving the relationships with chosen allies and sending messages that they are part of a strong institution. Small states are usually more influenced by their environment than big ones, but that does not mean that they can not concentrate on building themselves to become strong and agile when dealing with suchrisks. After all, adversaries can change over time, but the objective of staying alive will never change.

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how the Baltic States were presented in the Western media in the context of the Zapad-2017 excercise and indicate lessons for strategic communication. The study points out seven suggestions to the Baltic States to consider in their future strategic communication processes.

It can be argued that Lithuania's messages contributed most to the general Baltic States' image, which indicates that the state could have coordinated it's messages successfully. Although it can not be stated in full certainty because the study focused only on media texts and did not analyse these states' actual communication strategies. It shows that the Baltic States should consider a mutual media communication strategy as otherwise the aims of one state could be presented as the others as well. It should be pointed out that Lithuania was the one whose messages were presented the most in quantitative terms as well, which contributed to gaining the desired image.

The three Baltic States certainly have different communication strategies, but the overall objective of their strategies are usually the same – to keep the region safe. There were several similar messages in the three states media presentations. The most evident of these were hybrid threats which could have potential in becoming the Baltic States' mutual niche topic. Also, unity with the allies and the desire to have allies presented in the area were discussed a lot and these messages were expressed in a different manner. This shows that actors can express themselves in a different way to gain similar goals. Repeating and emphasising the most important messages and expressing them in a simple, catchy manner increases the probability of them being represented in the media.

It should be stressed that this study can not make any definite conclusions because it does not establish a cause-effect relationship between what was intended and what was presented. But it unveils the ways the presentation is shaped in the media environment and what the outcome of the communication activities conducted during the Zapad exercise in 2017 was.

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