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Framing Identity: Russian Media in the Baltics as a Mechanism of Soft Power

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FRAMING IDENTITY: RUSSIAN MEDIA IN THE BALTICS AS A MECHANISM OF SOFT POWER

by
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This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Stacy Walters.
I thank her for everything.

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ABSTRACT
JACKSON SHANNON MCARTHUR:
Framing Identity: Russian Media in the Baltics as a Mechanism of Soft Power
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Societal tensions surrounding language, national identity, collective memory, citizenship, and integration exist between the titular Baltic population and Russian speakers living in the Baltic states (Simons, 2015). The Russian government has tried to exploit these tensions via non-violent yet subversive political and cultural influence—or "soft power"—with limited success, particularly through Russian-language media (Kudors, 2015). While many scholars have focused on the reception of Russia's soft power among the Baltic Russian-speaking population, which has been primarily ineffective at advancing Russia's political goals (Cheskin, 2015; Kallas, 2016; Coolican, 2021), few have analyzed Russian-language media as a mechanism of Russian soft power in the Baltics. My research aims to examine Russian-language media as a vehicle of Russian soft power and seeks to assess how Moscow's discourse frames the issues of the Baltic states' 2004 ascension to NATO and the EU, the 2007 Bronze Night in Estonia, and Latvia's 2018 educational reforms phasing out instruction in the Russian language. I argue that Russian media as a mechanism of Russian soft power attempts to construct a separate cultural, political, and linguistic identity among Russian speakers in the Baltic states that is separate from their nationalizing states but not necessarily loyal to Russia. This media analysis sheds new light on Russian soft power in the Baltic states and will allow scholars and policymakers to evaluate Russian soft power not only in terms of its receptiveness among its target population but also with regard to its strategy, themes and structure.

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***All translations in this paper are my own*

Introduction: The Problem of Russian Media in the Baltics

The Russian Federation has one of the most notorious and effective propaganda machines on the planet, and over the past thirty years it has waged relentless media campaigns in post-Soviet countries such as Georgia, Ukraine, and the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) in order to reel them back into its regional sphere of influence—or "near abroad," as the Russian government refers to post-Soviet countries. Although not as notorious as Ukraine or Georgia in the realm of subversive Russian political interference and pro-Russian separatist movements, the Baltic states have their own similar issues surrounding conflicts of language, identity, and memory with regard to Russia. This is because—like Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, and many other post-Soviet countries—the Baltic states, particularly Estonia and Latvia, have a large number of Russian speakers who settled in these countries when they were part of the USSR and remained after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent independence of these countries in 1991. Few of these settlers knew the local languages, and after independence they became increasingly isolated from the titular populations (or native/ethnic Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians who speak the local languages as their native tongue) (Aasland, 2002). Over the past 30 years tensions have mounted between these two ethnolinguistic communities which have been exacerbated by certain historical events, particularly the 2004 ascension of the Baltic States to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU), the 2007 "Bronze Night" riots in Tallinn, Estonia over the removal of a Soviet-era statue, and the 2018 educational reforms in Latvia that plan to phase out instruction in the Russian language in public and private schools entirely

In response to these events, Russian media—particularly major publications in Moscow that still have a large Russian-speaking readership in the Baltics—pounced on the opportunity to score a propaganda victory and further divide an already fractured society by spreading fears of a NATO invasion and EU economic instability, criticizing the Baltic governments for "discrimination" against Russian speakers and spreading factually misleading information, among other things. Such media narratives are part of a broader geopolitical strategy pursued by the Kremlin, which is "soft power" or diplomacy through public relations, culture, media, and other non-coercive or military means (as opposed to "hard power" which involves military, political or economic coercion) (Nye, 2004b). Russian soft power strategies and their effects in the post-Soviet sphere, including media and other tactics, have been widely studied; however, an extensive qualitative analysis of Russian-language media in the Baltics is lacking in the literature related to post-Soviet studies. This thesis analyzes several major Russian newspaper outlets during a six-to-seven month timeframe corresponding to these three historical events: NATO and EU expansion, the Bronze Night, and Latvia's educational reforms. It argues that Russian media as a mechanism of Russian soft power attempts to construct a separate cultural, political, and linguistic identity among Russian speakers in the Baltic states that is separate from their nationalizing states but not necessarily loyal to Russia. It analyzes the major themes of Russian media during these timeframes and states their implications within the broader context of Russian soft power in the post-Soviet sphere.

Historical Background

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, 25 million ethnic Russians suddenly found themselves living outside the borders of their nominal homeland. This included 1.7 million ethnic Russians in the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (Diamant, 2017). After World War II, tens of thousands of Soviet troops and Russian colonists were brought to the

region to solidify Soviet domination and advance Soviet industry. Because the Soviet Union practiced a homogenizing language policy aimed at the suppression of regional national identity, Russian, being the language of "intercultural communication," replaced Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian as the primary language of professional and academic life and became mandatory in schools. Consequently, relatively few of the settlers learned the Baltic languages (Kent, 2000). The Soviets took draconian measures to rid Baltic society of "hostile elements"—particularly elites and politicians from the former governments but also their extended families—resulting in the mass deportation of at least 124,000 Baltic men, women and children in 1940-41 to the Soviet Far East to work in forced labor camps, many of whom perished in the harsh conditions of the gulags (Dunsdorf, 1975).

Upon the collapse of the USSR and the independence of the three Baltic republics in 1991, the Baltic states each attempted to restore their sovereignty and culture in the wake of a brutal occupation, once again making Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian the respective official languages. However, a sizable Russian-speaking population remained, particularly in Estonia and Latvia where they compromised 30% and 34% of the population, respectively (Kirch, 1992). Although the Baltic governments had anticipated that most would return to Russia, many of these Russian speakers remained in the Baltic states, partly due to the allure of higher living standards as opposed to those in Russia. Today, Russian speakers make up 25%, 44%, and 5% of the populations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, respectively. In some areas they constitute a majority, such as Narva, Estonia, where they account for 97% and Tallinn, Estonia's capital, where one survey puts the level of "non-Estonians" at 66 per cent (Simons, 2015; Statistics portal).

Although Lithuania granted automatic citizenship to all residents upon independence, the Estonian and Latvian governments—attempting to safeguard their indigenous cultures and

democratic sovereignty—established relatively strict naturalization procedures for people who moved to the territories after they were annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940. This policy effectively rendered the majority of Baltic Russian speakers stateless unless they passed language proficiency exams and made a loyalty oath to the state, among other citizenship requirements (Aasland, 2002, p. 59). The most likely reason why Lithuania granted automatic citizenship to all residents whereas Estonia and Latvia did not has to do with the fact that Lithuania has a comparatively small non-Lithuanian minority population whereas ethnic Estonians and Latvians only marginally constitute a national majority, thus creating a threat to national sovereignty and "decolonization" if ethnic minorities—especially Russians—were enfranchised (Solska, 2011, pp. 1092-93).

The citizenship issue has been controversial and has increased tension between the ethnolinguistic groups in the two countries. Many Russian speakers see the citizenship requirements as discriminatory, as they arrived in the republics—many were even invited to work there—in accordance with Soviet law, and they feel they are being deprived of a citizenship they have already earned (Aasland, 1994). In Latvia alone some 300,000 Russian speakers were classified as being non-citizens as of 2014, and in Estonia roughly 99,000 were residents of "undetermined citizenship" as of the 2010 census (Lepp, 2010; Simmons, 2015). In neither country are non-citizens allowed to vote in national elections, and some professions are reserved for citizens only, such as leading professions in public administration. However, both citizens and non-citizens enjoy the same social and economic rights provided they have permanent residency (Aasland, 2002, p. 61).

Russia, for its part, has had a difficult time coming to terms with Baltic independence, and Russia's unwillingness to admit the fact of Soviet occupation of the Baltics, let alone to apologize for the occupational crimes, has revealed an attitude of imperial nostalgia towards the

Baltic States (Šleivyte, 2009, p. 35). The Russian government has predictably attempted to exploit the societal tensions between Russian speakers and the native Baltic population in an attempt to destabilize the three small republics, particularly through the use of media, NGOs and the funding of Russia-friendly political parties (Jurknyas, 2014).

Research shows that residents of Estonia who do not speak or comprehend Estonian do not follow much of the Estonian media (including the Russian-language Estonian media) (Jakobson, 2002). Since television is the most important source of information for persons over twenty years of age, and in light of the fact that nearly three quarters of Russians in Estonia actively watch programs broadcast by Russian state TV channels, it is safe to say that Russian television channels play a substantial role in shaping the information space of Russian speakers resident in Estonia (p. 119). A similar situation exists in Latvia, where disinformation from Russian state TV as well as social media has become a major issue in recent years, especially in light of the fear among Latvian Russian speakers that their language and identity are at risk (Katamadze, 2023). Although Lithuania does not have as large of a Russian-speaking population as Estonia and Latvia, the country is still a major target of Russian disinformation (Rybarczyk, 2023). Latvia and Estonia introduced bans on Kremlin-backed media outlets shortly after the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine; however, Baltic Russian speakers are still able to access Russian media through satellite antennas or VPNs (Katamadze, 2023). For my research, I analyzed newspaper articles from a selection of these banned media outlets from specific time frames corresponding to major events in the history of Baltic Russians and used these sources to help answer how instruments of Russian soft power present key political and social issues to Russian speakers in the Baltic states. Although I would have preferred to analyze Russian TV content, time and feasibility constraints mandated that I analyze newspaper sources, which is the next best option in terms of both content and audience coverage in the Baltics.

Theoretical Framework

1. *Russian Soft Power and Influence in the Post-Soviet Sphere.* Soft power is traditionally defined as a country "obtain[ing] the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries want to follow it, admiring its values, emulating its example, and/or aspiring to its level of prosperity…. Soft power is the ability to shape the preferences of others…" (Seib, 2009, p. 4). Putin himself has described soft power as "a set of instruments and methods used to achieve foreign policy goals without resorting to military means, but with the help of information and other instruments of influence" (Putin, 2012). The term "soft power" was coined by American political scientist Joseph Nye, who defines it as the ability to attract based on a state's culture, political values and foreign policy, which must be perceived as legitimate and having moral authority. He cites young people behind the Iron Curtain listening to American music and news on Radio Free Europe and young Iranians today discreetly watching banned American videos and satellite television broadcasts as examples of American soft power (Nye, 2004a, 2008). Most post-Soviet scholars agree that the Kremlin has utilized various projects promoting the Russian language, Russian-language media, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and Russian business networks in former Soviet countries (Bogomolov & Lytvynenko, 2012; Feklyunina, 2016; Grigas, 2016; Coolican, 2021). Russia began utilizing ethno-cultural identity in order to enact political potential from the Russian–speaking diaspora in the post-Soviet sphere during the Yeltsin era with the "Yeltsin Doctrine" on the near abroad (enshrined in the Russian Foreign Policy Concept of 1992), which acknowledged Russia's privileged interests in Soviet successor republics (Coolican, 2021, p. 8). Crucially, their efforts focused primarily on ethnic Russians and Russian speakers during the late 2000's—early 2010's as Russia pursued a more assertive policy in its neighborhood with the aim of preventing US, NATO, and EU encroachment in the post-Soviet space (Feklyunina, 2016).

The political doctrine of "Russkii Mir" (lit. "Russian World") has become a staple of Russian soft power and refers to the sphere of military, political and cultural influence of Russia, primarily emphasizing Russian culture, the Russian language and Eastern Orthodoxy as well as challenging the dominant Western liberalism. Although originally a niche nationalist idea rooted in intellectual circles in post-Soviet Russia, the concept was eventually adopted by the Russian administration, with Putin founding the government-sponsored *Russkii Mir* Foundation in 2007 which aims at promoting the Russian language and culture worldwide. By 2010, *Russkii Mir* had set up 50 centers in 29 countries, including the US, Germany, and China (Kudors & Orttung, 2010; Laurelle, 2015). Currently, Russia employs a wide variety of soft power mechanisms in its near abroad, including labeling all ethnic Russians and Russian speakers residing outside the Russian Federation as "compatriots" (*sootechestvenniki*), promoting Russian language and culture abroad through privately and publicly funded NGOs including not only *Russkii Mir* but also *Russkii Dom* and *Rossotrudnichestvo*, and promoting Russia-friendly political parties in the Baltics such as Harmony Centre in Latvia and Centre Party in Estonia (Jurkynas, 2014; Grigas, 2016; Piper, 2020). More importantly, Russian media plays an integral role in the Kremlin's soft power strategy in the post-Soviet sphere, particularly in the Baltics. According to Grigas (2012), Russia has been able to create an information space which transcends national borders and speaks to the sizable Russian-speaking population in the Baltics that remains linked culturally, linguistically and ideologically to Moscow. She notes how Russian television channels such as First Baltic, RTR Planeta, NTV Mir, Russian and locally produced Russian-language newspapers, internet news portals and radio stations are important tools for disseminating information that often has a Kremlin bias, and that Russian media also promotes political forces loyal to Russia and rallies support for specific policies. For instance, in the 2010 Latvian parliamentary elections, First Baltic lobbied implicitly for the Russian minority Harmony Centre

party, and in 2007, the Russian language media tried to shape the perceptions of Estonian Russian minorities regarding the Soviet monument relocation in Tallinn, arguably helping incite the subsequent riots by providing false accounts of the events (for instance, reporting that the monument had been destroyed by the Estonian authorities) (Grigas, 2012).

The concept of "soft power" as it relates to mass media must be clarified. Mass media are closely associated with the idea of soft power in international relations, and states have invested heavily into reaching foreign publics via the media with the hopes of obtaining positive foreign policy outcomes. However, some scholars debate the reliability of soft power as a theoretical tool due to its inconsistencies (for example, the lines between "hard" and "soft" power are often blurred), and the role of media is no exception. For example, Szostek (2014) argues that the soft power framework is inadequate to capture the complexities of Russia's transnational media involvement in Ukraine as it assumes perpetual state agency despite noticeable diversity among different Russian news outlets and ignores local political and economic pressures, thus causing these publications to diverge from what "soft power" would assume. However, my findings do not display a significant diversity in perspective despite coming from a wide variety of Russian publications, which I believe validates a soft power interpretation. I also support this position due to the fact that, despite its theoretical concerns, the idea of soft power (*miagkaia sila*) has been officially incorporated into Russian foreign policy: the Foreign Policy Concept adopted by President Putin in February 2013 explicitly describes soft power as "an indispensable component of modern international relations" and lists strengthening the position of Russian mass media on the global stage as a clear foreign policy goal (Russian Foreign Ministry…). I maintain that soft power is the most adequate framework for describing Russian media influence in the Baltic states considering the absence of comparable theoretical alternatives.

2. *Identity and Integration of Russian Speakers in the Baltic States.* The existence and construction of Russian identity in the Baltic states has been a subject of considerable research, with the overall consensus being that Baltic Russian-speaking identity is mostly not aligned with the Kremlin's political stance and that attempts to sway Russian speakers in the Baltics through "Russkii Mir" nationalism has been met with limited receptiveness (Cheskin, 2015; Kallas, 2016; Coolican, 2021). Explanations for this phenomenon usually center around the idea that the Baltic Russian-speaking diaspora remains ethnically Russian by self identification with an appreciation of Russian language and culture, but with Estonian/Latvian/Lithuanian civic identity (Coolican, 2021); that a more consolidated identity has failed to develop because Russian speakers would have to perceive their "nationalizing states" of residence more negatively and their "external homeland," the Russian Federation, more positively (Cheskin, 2015); and that there exists a significant generational gap where younger Estonian-Russians show even weaker territorial, cultural-linguistic, political and civic loyalties towards Russia (Kallas, 2016). Likewise, Coolican (2021) notes how the trend towards diasporic communities in the Baltic states viewing the "host-land" as "home" has shown considerable increases, with 66% of respondents from other ethnicities indicating Estonia as their homeland in 2011, increasing to 76% in 2014. Similarly, in Latvia 51% of ethnic Russians consider themselves "Latvian Patriots," indicating that the Kremlin's policies of "Russkii Mir" seem to have failed to have resounding effects on Russian diasporic communities in the Baltic states since 2014 (p. 10).

However, there also appears to be a general consensus that, while Russian identity currently does not play a significant role in the formation of political consciousness among Baltic Russian speakers, the Baltic states should nevertheless take necessary measures to curtail future influence of the Kremlin among this demographic, especially considering a past of troubled relations between Baltic Russian speakers and the titular populations (Kaiser, 2012; Grigas,

2016; Coolican, 2021). This follows from the fact that many Russian speakers in the Baltics, particularly in Estonia and Latvia, did not receive automatic citizenship upon independence and have experienced subsequent difficulty receiving citizenship, resulting in a disillusionment with the titular state and isolation in majority Russian-speaking communities despite ambiguous attitudes towards Russia (Kaiser, 2012; Trimbach & O'Lear, 2015). Such strong local attachments, coupled with a lack of social integration and political incorporation pose serious challenges to the Baltic states, EU, and NATO to counter Russian overtures and nationalist discourse (Trimbach & O'Lear, 2015).

3. *Russian relations with the Baltic States.* Since the 1990's, Baltic-Russian relations have been among the most contentious on the European continent. Tensions have revolved around the status of Russian-speaking minorities, Moscow's resistance to EU and NATO enlargement, and energy security (Grigas, 2014, p. 1). Russian-speaking minorities remain a particularly salient issue in Baltic–Russian relations, as exemplified by the "Bronze Night" of 2007 in which the Estonian government removed a Soviet monument in Tallinn, causing riots by Russian speakers and catalyzing a coordinated cyber attack against the Estonian government by Russian "hacktivists" (Galbreath & Lašas, 2011). Likewise, Latvia's 2004 education reform, which changed the language balance in minority language schools to a 60/40 split between Latvian and Russian, created a great deal of domestic collective action among Latvian Russian speakers, with Russia denouncing the Latvian reform in international forums and threatening Latvia with sanctions (Galbreath and Lašas, 2011; Bergmane, 2020). Frosty relations between Russia and its Baltic neighbors reflect underlying conflict at the level of identities: Baltic and Russian post-Soviet national identity constructions, together with the historical narratives they are based on, are incompatible and antagonistic. This antagonism has increased, rather than eroded over time, reflecting certain content shifts in national identity constructions, as well as the consolidation and

institutionalization of these constructions as the ideational basis of state- and nationhood (Berg & Ehin, 2016).

Methods and Data

I conducted a systematic qualitative analysis of themes in Russian-language newspaper sources that employs codes to recognize the prevalence of Russian propaganda narratives. I have created definitions such as "anti-Western rhetoric" and "pro-Russian political rhetoric" and operationalized those definitions with certain words, phrases, or tones in a codebook (see appendix, p. 78). I looked specifically for words/phrases which counteract the dominant narratives about the integration of Russian speakers into the dominant Estonian/Latvian/Lithuanian society or which attempt to portray these countries in a negative light (economically, politically, etc.). I coded my materials in the qualitative analysis software NVivo, noting the presence of certain concepts/factors/themes in each article as well as their absence.

When choosing my sample, I selected major Russian-language media outlets with a large international circulation which present mainstream international political issues to a general audience. These news outlets include: *Argumenty i Fakty, TASS, Itogi, Izvestiia, Kommersant, Komsomol'skaia Pravda, Moscovskaia Pravda, Moskovski Komsomolets, Nezavisimaia Gazeta, Novaia Gazeta, Ogonëk, Pravda,* and *Rossiiskaia Gazeta.* Given the fact that Russian media plays a substantial role in shaping the information space of Russian-speaking populations in the Baltics (Enteringmode, 2007; Katamadze, 2023; Rybarczyk, 2023), these criteria ensure that these populations at least have access to the media I have analyzed and were most likely consuming a significant amount of it during the time frames of analysis.

However, it is important to note that not all of these outlets are the same. Some, such as *Rossiiskaia Gazeta, Argumenti i Fakti, and TASS*, are directly owned by the Russian government

and are almost guaranteed to be in line with the Kremlin's policy. Others, such as *Izvestiia and Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, are privately owned publications yet are generally seen as being in line with the government's perspective—probably due to the fact that they are owned by oligarchs with direct ties to Putin (Zakem et al., 2018). However, independent publications such as *Kommersant, Nezavisimaia Gazeta* and *Novaia Gazeta* are known to have been critical of the government to varying degrees and have faced pressure from the authorities in the past, most notably *Novaia Gazeta* for which seven journalists have been murdered since 2000 in connection with their investigations and which relocated to Latvia in 2022 (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2019). These publications represent a wide variety of views, which I believe is necessary for evaluating the Russian-language media landscape in the Baltics as a whole—even though my findings reveal narrative consistency in line with a soft power interpretation.

To select my sample of articles, I used the Universal Database of Russian Newspapers provided by the Library of Congress through Eastview Information Services. I selected a total of 140 articles which specifically dealt with the Baltics and/or Russian speakers in the Baltic states from specific date ranges and coded them based on my operational definitions. The articles I selected were based on the frequencies of key search words, such as "NATO" *(NATO)* or "education" *(Obrazovanie)*, and I selected the top 50 (or until I discerned a loss in relevancy). The date ranges I selected correspond to key three events in the history of Baltic-Russian relations: the 2004 Ascension of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to NATO and the EU (54 articles), the 2007 Bronze Night in Estonia (51 articles), and the 2018 educational reforms in Latvia regarding Russian-language education in public schools (35 articles). Each date range spans a window of six to seven months, with the NATO/EU expansion chapter including three months before and three months after the event and the remaining chapters including six months after the event (due to NATO/EU expansion being a highly anticipated event, while the other two

events were more spontaneous and lack sufficient media coverage prior). These are the most commonly referenced events throughout the literature regarding post-Soviet Baltic-Russian relations, which is why I choose to analyze Russian media discourse surrounding these events and their implications in the realm of Russian soft power.

For my thematic analysis I hypothesized four broad, overarching rhetorical themes that I expected to find throughout Russian media dealing with each focal event based on the existing literature: anti-Baltic rhetoric, pro-minority rhetoric, Anti-Western rhetoric, and pro-Russian rhetoric. Although all three of my theoretical frameworks help justify these hypotheses, some work better than others for each hypothesis. The soft power framework provides the best explanation for each as it is inherent to the process of Russian media dissemination in the Baltic states, but it is more adequate when paired with either or both of the other two frameworks.

The first hypothesis, anti-Baltic rhetoric, attempts to portray the titular populations of the Baltic states (native Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians) or the Baltic governments in a negative economic, political, or social light. This could include explicit or implicit accusations of discrimination against Russian speakers as well as implying that the Baltic governments are economically incompetent. All three frameworks formed the basis for this hypothesis as this rhetoric should reflect not only how soft power underscores souring interstate relations but also the exclusion of Russian speakers from Baltic society. Next, pro-minority rhetoric presents the Russian-speaking minority in a positive or protagonistic light in comparison to the native population, but it does not necessarily portray the titular population in a negative light. Examples could include coverage of a Russian-speaking community event or advocacy for Russian minority rights and Russian-language public education. The soft power and identity and integration frameworks inspired this hypothesis in light of all of the existing research surrounding the cultural and political self-identification of Baltic Russian speakers, and I

expected Russian media to attempt to cultivate the "Russian" aspect of this collective identity. Third, Anti-Western rhetoric attempts to portray Western political and economic institutions or countries in a negative or threatening light, such as painting NATO as an aggressive military bloc or the EU as being economically detrimental to its members. The soft power and Baltic-Russian relations frameworks bred this hypothesis as I predicted that Russian media would utilize political and economic concerns in addition to cultural ties in its attempt to turn the Russian-speaking population away from their nationalizing states. Finally, pro-Russian rhetoric attempts to portray the Russian government as righteous, fair, and/or benevolent in comparison to the Baltic states and the West and may also kinder "Russkii Mir" nationalist sentiments among the Russian diaspora. All three frameworks contributed to this hypothesis, as I suspected that Russian media would most likely attempt to paint the Russian government as being both politically and morally superior than its adversaries and glorify or defend the Russian language and culture abroad as they relate to perceived discrimination. However, these hypotheses were only broad categories or "rubrics" meant to help me navigate the Russian media landscape, and I added to and altered these themes through the inductive process of thematic analysis.

Finally, the coding process consisted primarily of identifying major themes based on my hypotheses and then proceeding to create additional "child codes" for more specific concepts related to each theme. For instance, "portraying popular resistance to de-Russification" and "Baltic governments are disrespectful to the memories of WWII" are both child codes of the theme "anti-Baltic rhetoric" (see appendix on p. 78). I also created additional themes and child codes as I encountered them throughout the data, such as the theme "no discernable political rhetoric" which was absent from my original four hypotheses.

Conclusion

Russian media has been a considerable source of influence in the information space of the Baltic states since the collapse of the Soviet Union, utilizing the cultural and political divide between titular Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians and the sizable Russian-speaking population in these states in order to advance the Kremlin's expansionist "Russkii Mir" soft power agenda in its near abroad. This thesis will analyze Russian-language newspaper material in the Baltic states from selected Russian publications surrounding three key events in the history of Baltic Russian speakers: the ascension of the Baltic states to NATO and the EU, the Bronze Night, and Latvia's 2018 educational reforms. It analyzes coverage of these events from the perspectives of Russian soft power and influence in the post-Soviet sphere, identity and integration of Russian speakers in the Baltic states, and Russian relations with the Baltic states, and argues that Russian media as a mechanism of Russian soft power attempts to construct a separate cultural, political, and linguistic identity among Russian speakers in the Baltic states that is separate from their nationalizing states but not necessarily loyal to Russia. The following chapters will analyze coverage of these three events in more detail, finding the major themes and discussing their significance.

Chapter 1: Russian Discourse surrounding the Baltic Ascension to NATO and the EU

On 29 March, 2004, NATO expanded to include the Baltic states as well as Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. A little over a month later on 1 May 2004, ten new countries joined the EU in its largest ever enlargement, including the Baltic states. Russia opposed these enlargements, perceiving the expansion of NATO and the EU as not only a threat to its regional sphere of influence but also as a breach of faith. The official Russian narrative is that Western leaders promised Mikhail Gorbachev that the alliance would not expand eastward in exchange for the withdrawal of Russian troops from former East Germany. Although the US and West Germany did pressure Gorbachev into allowing Germany to reunify and briefly implied that such a deal might be on the table, there was never a formal deal, as many Russian government officials claim (Sarotte, 2014). The dispute over alleged promises to not expand NATO has greatly distorted relations between Moscow and Washington. However, while Russia fiercely opposed NATO's enlargement in 2004, it did not resist the expansion of the EU to the same degree and even showed considerable interest in developing a strategic partnership with the EU (Delcour & Kostanyan, 2014). However, relations with the EU quickly deteriorated after the creation of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) later the same year, a policy framework which extended the EU's influence to the post-Soviet sphere and teased membership to states like Ukraine and Georgia, which Moscow perceived as a clear threat to Russia's regional hegemony.

In the period shortly before March 2004 Russia used every soft-power vehicle at its disposal to prevent the expansion of NATO and the EU, particularly the media. Russia media

campaigns highlighted the purported economic disadvantages of integration, empowered skeptics to undermine perceptions of candidates' suitability for membership, emphasized the purported negative consequences of NATO enlargement for European security, painted NATO as a fundamentally anti-Russian 'aggressive military bloc' and casted EU integration as a loss of identity—subjugation by an alien and impersonal Brussels (Greene, 2012). Indeed, a thematic analysis of Russian newspaper material from the period January to July 2004 reveals a recurrence of almost all of these themes as they relate to the Baltic states.

The 2004 expansion of NATO and the EU was not only one of the most tense chapters in the history of Baltic-Russia relations but also fostered continual animosity between Russia and the broader West, laying the groundwork for a hostile pan-European political environment that arguably culminated in the 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine. This event also exacerbated tensions between Russian speakers and the titular populations in the Baltics, contributing to the emergence of subsequent events throughout the following decade such as the Bronze Night and Latvia's educational reforms. Because of the extensive presence of Russian media surrounding NATO and EU expansion as well as the high political stakes involved, this episode in the history of the Baltic states is an excellent choice for analyzing mechanisms of Russian soft power vis-à-vis media influence. This chapter analyzes 54 Russian news articles from 1 January to 31 July 2004 and argues that Russian media employs a variety of techniques to sow resistance towards NATO and EU ascension among the Russian-speaking population in the Baltic states, including highlighting the economic disadvantages of the EU, vague fearmongering surrounding NATO encroachment, and highlighting Russia's just and morally superior stance in diplomatic affairs with NATO and the EU.

Findings

A thematic analysis of 54 Russian-language news articles from 1 January to 31 July 2004 reveals a prevalence of four primary themes throughout the data. The four themes are: anti-Western political or economic rhetoric, pro-Russian political rhetoric, no discernable political rhetoric, and anti-Baltic rhetoric, as well as three other present but statistically miniscule themes. These themes are present in the other chapters as well; however, their relative proportions are different as well as several of their child codes, many of which only relate to particular incidents such as the Bronze Night or NATO/EU expansion. I will delve into a deeper discussion of the operational definitions of these themes in the following analysis section, but for now I will only present the raw data. Although each of these four themes consists of up to twelve codes, for the sake of clarity and simplicity I will limit discussion to the top two or three codes within each theme in the analysis section and only give the data for the remainder.

Of the four primary themes found in this sub-dataset concerning NATO/EU expansion, anti-Western political or economic rhetoric is by far the most prevalent, present in 64.81% of the articles and constituting 53.62% of the total codes for this sub-dataset (Figures 1.1, 1.2). Within this theme, the most popular codes are: highlighting economic disadvantages of integration (37.04% of articles; 14.49% of codes), invasion rhetoric (31.48% of articles; 12.32% of codes); NATO, the EU, or the US is aggressive, undiplomatic, against the interests of Russia, or unreliable (27.78% of articles; 10.87% of codes), portraying popular resistance to Western integration (12.96% of articles; 5.07% of codes), emphasizing the negative consequences of NATO expansion for European security or relations with Russia (12.96% of articles; 5.07% of codes), and EU or NATO integration leads to identity loss and/or subjugation (9.26% of articles; 3.62% of codes).

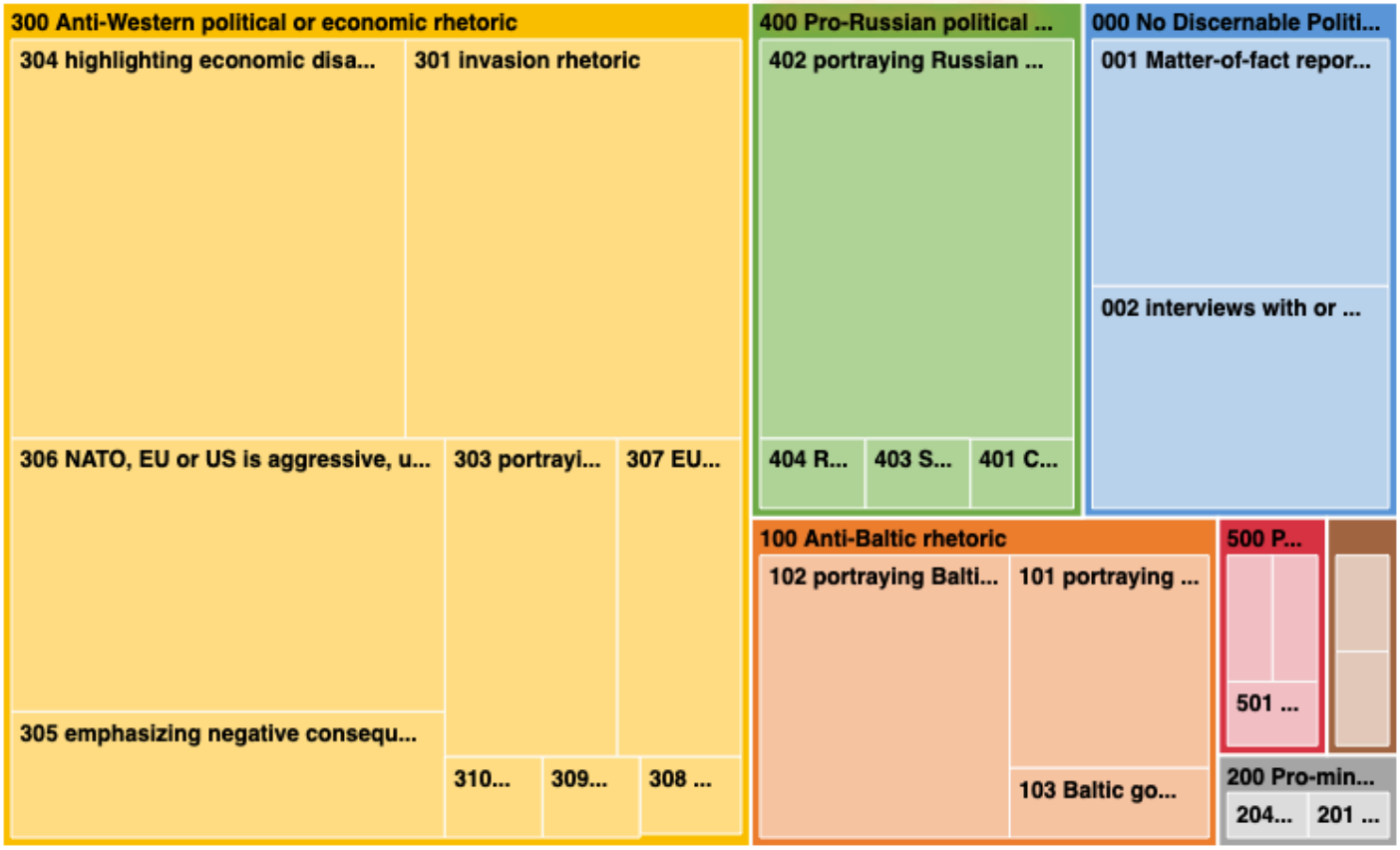
The second most common theme in this sub-dataset is pro-Russian political rhetoric, which is present in 33.33% of the articles and constituting 14.49% of the total codes for this sub-dataset. The most common code for this theme is overwhelmingly the portrayal of the Russian government and Russian politicians as benevolent or just, defending them from wrongdoing or denying allegations (31.48% of articles; 12.32% of codes). The remainder of codes for this theme—including portraying the Russian government and its allies as protectors against the West, trying to present history from the Russian government's perspective in order to justify historical events, and "compatriot" rhetoric—were only present in 11.43%-14.29% of the articles and each constituted only 0.72% of the share of total codes.

The third most common theme in the data surrounding NATO/EU expansion is an apparent lack of any discernible political rhetoric, which I felt must be included to give an accurate picture of the Russian media landscape. This theme is present in 29.63% of the articles and constitutes 13.77% of total codes for this sub-dataset. The only two codes present in in this theme in this sub-dataset are: matter-of-fact reporting (18.52% of articles; 7.25% of codes) and interviews with or extensively quoting Baltic politicians or other Western officials/analysts about their views (16.67% of articles; 6.52% of codes).

The fourth most common theme in this sub-dataset is anti-Baltic rhetoric, which is present in 27.78% of the articles and comprises 13.04% of the total codes for this sub-dataset. Within this theme there were a total of three codes for this sub-dataset: portraying the Baltic government or populations as repressive against Russian speakers or biased against Russia or Russian media (18.52% of articles; 7.25% of codes), portraying the Baltic governments as non-diplomatic, aggressive, or as Western puppets (11.11% of articles; 4.35% of codes), and stating or implying that the Baltic governments do not reflect the values of the EU, or questioning the legality of their laws (3.70% of articles; 1.45% of codes).

This sub-dataset also observed a presence of three other themes, although they are only present in 12.96% of articles and constitute only 5.07% of the total codes for this sub-dataset combined. These themes are: portraying the Baltic governments or Western institutions and countries in a positive manner, portraying the Russian government or politicians in a negative manner, and pro-minority rhetoric, a theme which will be discussed in further detail in chapters 2 and 3.

Figure 1.1: Hierarchy Chart of Themes and Child Codes (NATO/EU Expansion)



Analysis

Anti-Western Political or Economic Rhetoric

Anti-Western political or economic rhetoric refers to discourse aimed at portraying Western political and economic institutions or countries in a negative or threatening light. With respect to NATO and EU expansion, this form or rhetoric most often highlights the economic disadvantages of integration. An excerpt from *Argumenty i Fakty* dated 11 February 2004 clearly demonstrates this argument: "And new EU members will switch to the Euro no earlier than 2006. But, according to experts, prices within countries will increase by 15-30%" ("Otdykh…, 2004). Russian media tends to highlight prospects for looming economic decline and an asymmetrical relationship with other more established and wealthy EU members upon the Baltic states' entry into the EU, particularly as a result of the EU's stringent economic regulations. A *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* excerpt from 11 February 2004 highlights this sentiment:

> The recently strengthened desire of the European bureaucracy to regulate everything and everyone down to the parameters of a banana is somewhat reminiscent of the former planned economy. In this regard, an article by the famous economist Anders Aslund, published recently in the Washington Post, is very interesting… "Amid the hype about EU enlargement," writes Åslund, "few people noticed that the post-Soviet states further to the east have experienced a boom since 1999... The "new tigers" were Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine, significantly ahead of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. The three Baltic countries are doing significantly better than Central Europe, but not as much as their eastern neighbors" … "The truth is—and this may be shocking—that the post-Soviet states have more efficient economies than Central European countries because they are free from the harmful influence of the EU," Aslund concludes (Grigor'ev, 2004).

This narrative portraying Russia and non-EU post-Soviet countries as emerging "tigers" and the EU as a detrimental and strict economic regime harbors the clear intent of spurring discontent towards the EU. However, this quote is loaded with factual inconsistencies, the primary one being that Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine were faring better economically than new EU member states at the time of the article's publication in 2004. According to Astrov et al.

(2012), overall economic growth in Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine was not particularly impressive during the transition period from planned to free-market economies: between 1990 and 2011, GDP increased by 65% in Kazakhstan but just 12% in Russia. And even by 2011, Ukraine's GDP was still 30% below the 1990 level, according to estimates made by the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies. This compared with a 66% GDP increase in the new EU member states and a nearly 50% GDP increase in the entire EU in the same period (p. 2). But what is particularly misleading about this quote is the cherry-picking of prominent Swedish economist Anders Aslund, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council who at the time was the director of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Russian and Eurasian program and who worked closely with Jeffery Sachs in pursuing infamously radical economic reforms in post-Soviet countries (Nelson & Kuzes, 1995). In the original Washington Post article authored by Aslund, he makes clear that the expansion of the EU is a good thing for democracy and should be celebrated, but he believes that the strict economic regulations of the EU (particularly the Common Agricultural Policy) are detrimental to growth and have caused post-Soviet countries to surpass the EU, thus damaging democracy's economic image:

> Next Saturday, the European Union (EU) will admit 10 states, eight of them former communist countries. This is a moment to celebrate… But it is also a moment of economic concern… The EU has many advantages, but economic dynamism is no longer one of them…This is not to whitewash the post-Soviet countries. They are both corrupt and authoritarian, while Central Europe is eminently democratic and richer… The point, rather, is that the EU model generates stable democracy but little economic growth… The EU needs to liberalize its economy and reduce its fiscal profligacy, not only for its own benefit, but also for the reputation of democracy. Countries such as Ukraine should not have to choose between democracy and growth (Aslund, 2004).

However, the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* excerpt intentionally omits the central premise of Aslund's argument, quoting only his criticisms of the EU in comparison to the post-Soviet countries in an attempt to dissuade readers from the EU entirely, which is antithetical to Aslund's original point.

It is important to note that in 2004 Russia's antagonization of the EU was a relatively recent phenomenon. Greene (2012) explains how, during the 1990's, Russia initially perceived the EU as an economically benign organization which had the potential to reduce US influence in Europe, a long-time Soviet foreign policy goal. However, this view shifted as the EU's ability to interfere in Russia's economic and political sphere of influence became gradually more apparent by the early 2000's, particularly the EU's efforts to undermine Russia's energy monopoly through diversification of gas supply as well as Bulgaria's introduction of a visa regime for Russian citizens in 2001 (pp. 5-6). It is quite surprising that rhetoric emphasizing the economic disadvantages of the EU is the most common code for this sub-dataset which concerns both NATO and EU expansion, particularly considering that, in 2004, Russia-NATO relations had been consistently tense for over half a century whereas EU-Russia relations had only begun to freeze in the past few years. This sort of cherry-picking targets of criticism based on relevancy and immediate goals is a staple of Russian soft power which will be discussed further in later chapters.

The second most common code within the theme of anti-Western political or economic rhetoric is—unsurprisingly— "invasion" rhetoric that most often targets NATO in particular by implying a looming Western invasion or sense of impending political or economic domination from Western countries and institutions. This rhetoric also includes the threat of economic and political domination from the EU but to a lesser extent than the threat of military incursions by NATO. Although this type of discourse focuses only on indirect threats, such as increased military activity near the Russian border and the potential for espionage, the content as well as the relatively large presence of this sort of rhetoric seems to promote concerns of a possible NATO military invasion despite never explicitly making this connection. For instance, a *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* article from 25 February 2004 promotes fears of NATO spy planes

encroaching next to Russian territory and Russian citizens being “watched with all eyes” as a result of the Baltic states’ ascension to NATO:

> At this time, a NATO spy plane is being registered in Latvia and Estonia. The NATO long-range radar warning aircraft E-3 "AWACS" carried out its first reconnaissance flight directly near the borders of Russia on the evening of February 23. The day before, a reconnaissance aircraft flew from German territory (Gilenkirchen airbase) to Rumble airfield in Latvia to demonstrate the capabilities of the AWACS-NATO system. Taking into account the sensitivity of the event to Russia’s security interests, our Foreign Ministry submitted an official request in advance for the participation of its observer in the flights. The answer is a categorical “no.” Now all that remains is to officially “regret” what happened and call on neighbors to understand the essence of the Founding Act of the Russian Federation - NATO, which implies cooperation in such cases. Obviously, Russia will have to get used to the fact that from the territory of the Baltic states, which recently became members of the alliance, we will be watched with all eyes (Sedov, 2004).

Of course, allowing a Russian observer on a reconnaissance flight, especially one involving NATO assets and potentially sensitive information or technology, would have required careful consideration of security implications. NATO likely made the decision based on established protocols and considerations for protecting its operational integrity and classified information. The excerpt references the “Founding Act,” otherwise known as the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation, signed in 1997, which outlines principles and commitments regarding security cooperation between NATO and Russia. Although the excerpt claims that the Founding Act implies cooperation in “such cases” (referring to a reconnaissance mission), the document only focuses on broad principles of cooperation, transparency, and mutual security interests between NATO and Russia and does not specifically reference cooperation in reconnaissance missions, especially missions between two NATO member states (Founding act on mutual relations…). The article also implies that Russians will be “watched with all eyes”; however, such fears are completely unwarranted. NATO military presence in the Baltic region was almost non-existent for an entire decade following the accession of the Baltic states in 2004, with a total of four

fighter aircraft for the Baltic Air Policing mission. Only after Russia's aggression against Georgia in 2008 did NATO begin to consider the requirements for the defense of the Baltics and engage in small-scale collective defense exercises in the region (Stoicescu & Praks, 2016). This sort of vague fearmongering lends itself to an impending NATO encroachment or even an invasion, yet what exactly the disadvantages of having NATO planes close to the Russian border to the average Russian citizen (or Baltic Russian-speaker) are markedly unclear—particularly when most Russian citizens are already being closely scrutinized by the Kremlin's robust security apparatus.

Russian media surrounding NATO and EU expansion likewise attempts to frame NATO, the EU, or the US as aggressive, undiplomatic, against the interests of Russia, or unreliable, often portraying Western countries or politicians as being unreasonable or antagonistic in diplomatic affairs. A *Kommersant* article from 3 June 2004 portrays Brussels as having gone back on its promise to keep NATO aircraft away from Russian borders and as acting callously and dismissively to Russia's security concerns:

> Brussels also reacted without much understanding to other issues of concern to Moscow. NATO members promised not to bring the alliance's military infrastructure close to Russian borders. But, from their point of view, this does not apply to NATO aviation, which, having been stationed in the Baltic countries, began patrolling the air borders of the alliance (Gankin, 2004).

Although this example highlight the concerns of Moscow and not necessarily the concerns of Russian speakers in the Baltic states, the majority of whom express little loyalty to Russia itself (Cheskin, 2015; Kallas, 2016; Coolican, 2021), the primary objective of Russian media discourse here is most likely to highlight the supposed uncooperative and dismissive behavior of the EU in diplomatic affairs and spread fears of how the EU's one-sided approach with Russia could potentially translate into its relationship with its new Baltic members. This

type of discourse also portrays EU politicians as being needlessly uncooperative with Russia and emphasizes an asymmetrical dynamic between Moscow and Brussels:

> Moscow has calculated that due to the accession of former socialist countries to the EU, Russia will lose 150 million euros annually. As compensation, the Kremlin wants, in particular, a relaxation and abolition of the EU visa regime for Russian citizens, large-scale economic assistance to the Kaliningrad region, a reduction in import tariffs and an increase in quotas for steel and a number of other Russian export products. The Europeans are ready to bargain on all subjects, but they were very sensitive and resolutely rejected the attempt to link this with the extension of the PCA *(Partnership and Cooperation Agreement)* to new members of the union. Because it looks like an ultimatum, and ultimatums are inappropriate between friends and partners… Each side has their reasons. But the problem is not to do with them. "Friends and partners" with a "high degree of cooperation and trust" would somehow come to an agreement (Mineev, 2004).

Stating that Russia will lose 150 million euros annually as a result of EU enlargement is misleading as it implies a substantial economic loss. In fact, Russian analysts predicted that the consequences of EU enlargement into all ten of the candidate countries would be marginal for the Russian economy and that minor short-term adjustment losses would be balanced by other long-term benefits, including the reduction of customs duties and the more rapid movement of cargo. Russian officials also stated that possible annual losses were unlikely to exceed $600 million, while total trade turnover would be about $100 billion (Karabeshkin & Spechler, 2007).

Of particular interest here are the references to the EU visa regime and Kaliningrad, an issue which dominated the agenda in Russo-European negotiations prior to the EU enlargement. Kaliningrad, a Russian exclave located between and completely surrounded by Poland and Lithuania, houses some 431,000 Russian citizens (Europe. Severo-Zapadny Federal'ny Okrug). When Poland and Lithuania made plans to ascend to the Schengen Agreement—a pan-European agreement which abolishes border controls between member countries, most of which are also EU members (i.e. *the Schengen Area*)—in tandem with the EU, it meant that Russian citizens in Kaliningrad had to now obtain passports and visas to travel from Kaliningrad to mainland Russia

in accordance with Schengen regulations, a requirement the Russian government was reluctant to impose on its own citizens. In 2002 Russia and the EU agreed to a compromise which allowed rail travelers commuting to-and-from Kaliningrad to obtain a relatively cheap "Facilitated Transit Document" which served as a semi-visa, although the visa requirement remained for non-rail travelers (Prozorov, 2007; Horris, 2011). Russian politicians view the visa requirement as an exclusionary gesture against not only Russian citizens traveling "within" their own country but also against Russia as a whole, which is cast "outside" of Europe (Prozorov, 2007).

To the Russian-speaking readership in the Baltics and throughout the broader Russian-speaking diaspora, such narratives of exclusion against Russians in Kaliningrad by a broader "Europe" likely strike an intentionally resonant chord. Such appeals to anti-Russian exclusionism are unlikely to be effective in the Baltics, however, as Russian speakers in the Baltics who have the status of an alien or a permanent residence permit can travel freely within the EU and Russia (Ryazantsev et al., 2022). In fact, a 2019 survey conducted by the Latvian Office of Citizenship and Migration reveals that, of the 17 percent of Latvia's non-citizens who refuse to take the citizenship exam, 12 percent answered it is due to the benefits of visa-free traveling to the Russian Federation allowed by their status (Bergmane, 2020). What is more likely at play here amounts to a possible "call to action" of Baltic Russian speakers to resist their countries' ascensions to the EU, which will harm their fellow "compatriots" in Kaliningrad. Although this example is not as direct, such instances of attempting to unify and construct a collective identity among the Russian-speaking diaspora is a common theme throughout the data.

Pro-Russian Political Rhetoric

Pro-Russian political rhetoric aims to portray the Russian government or society in a positive or benevolent light, usually in comparison to the Baltic states or the broader West, including the EU and the US. In relation to NATO/EU expansion, this form of rhetoric most

often takes the form of portraying the Russian government and politicians as benevolent or just, defending them from wrongdoing or denying allegations. The primary goal of this discourse seems to be to cast Russia as having the moral high ground in all diplomatic affairs, as plainly demonstrated by a *Kommersant* excerpt from 10 March 2004: "Russia is committed to developing good neighborly relations with Latvia and Estonia, but the level of relations with them will be determined by what real steps will be taken by these countries to resolve the problems of concern to Russia" ("Mirovaia Praktika…, 2004). This type of rhetoric often attempts to show how Russia employs every measure at its disposal to try to get Western countries and institutions to cooperate, as displayed by another *Kommersant* article from 3 June 2004 which employs such language as "Moscow has been trying hard to persuade NATO countries" and "Russia insists that these countries… adhere to the basic principles of the treaty":

> Over the past months, Moscow has been trying hard to persuade NATO countries to begin the process of ratifying the adapted Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). This issue is relevant for Russia, in particular, in connection with the accession of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Slovenia to NATO—they did not sign the agreement and therefore are not bound by the obligation not to station additional troops and weapons on their territory. Russia insists that these countries join the CFE Treaty or, at worst, undertake to adhere to the basic principles of the treaty (Gankin, 2004).

It is not surprising that Russia presents itself in such a manner in relation to the West in international affairs and that this type of rhetoric occurs at such a high frequency concerning EU and NATO expansion. By highlighting how the West continues to ignore Russia's security concerns, the Kremlin can assert itself as the reasonable victim against an aggressive bloc that plans to use the Baltic states as military outposts which are unobligated to international treaties. Perhaps this is also the Kremlin's way of compensating for Russia's relative unpopularity and lack of direct loyalty among the Baltic Russian-speaking population, attempting to highlight Russia's supposed just stance in international affairs in comparison to the untrustworthiness and unreliability of the broader West, which allegedly even refuses to adhere to one of its own

post-war multilateral treaties. Popular support for Russia among Baltic Russian speakers is indeed low: According to Kallas (2016), 66.7% of 642 surveyed Estonian Russian speakers answered "Does not/rather does not connect" when asked if the statement "Russia supports and helps people like me; represents our interest" connects them to Russia or to former republics of the Soviet Union (p. 23). There is likewise much evidence that Russian speakers in the Baltic states view themselves as fundamentally different from Russians in Russia (Vihalemm & Masso, 2003; Fein, 2005; Zepa, 2006; Cheskin, 2013). If "Russkii mir" nationalism has so far been ineffective in the Baltics, then painting a righteous political image of itself is the Kremlin's next best strategy.

No Discernable Political Rhetoric

The third most common theme in the sub-dataset concerning NATO/EU expansion was no discernable political rhetoric, which I limited to articles in which I could not discern any form of bias in favor of Russia (or the West and the Baltic states for that matter). I felt this was an important theme to include in order to paint an accurate picture of the Russian media landscape and minimize systematic bias in my sampling. There were many articles which simply stated the facts of recent events, such as newsreels (which constituted 18.52% of the articles and 7.25% of codes); however, the most notable type of article from this theme consisted of interviews with Baltic politicians or other Western officials and analysts about their views towards the Baltic states' ascension to NATO and the EU. For example, an *Izvestiia* article from 29 March 2004 titled "Harri Tiido, Estonian Ambassador to NATO: The fact that Russia lost us is for the best" allows the Estonian Ambassador to NATO to extensively justify his country's decision to join NATO and express Estonia's enthusiasm for becoming part of a broader European community:

> - What is most significant for Estonia in the alliance with NATO?
> - Estonia's goal is to be present at all European negotiations where important issues are resolved. NATO is the primary European alliance where security and defense issues are

> discussed. Participation in these discussions and the right to make decisions on a parity basis with other countries so that not a single decision concerning Estonia is made behind our back is, perhaps, the most important thing. Joining NATO returns us to the community to which we have always considered ourselves, that is, the European one. With common values and common interests (Vinogradova, 2004).

The prevalence of this type of rhetoric—or rather, the absence thereof—is quite surprising given the overtly propagandistic nature of Russian media. This could of course be the work of independent journalists in Russia going against the grain of state narratives; however, it also could be a direct and intentional soft power strategy of the Kremlin in an attempt to minimize popular perceptions of itself as being heavily biased. The popularity of this discourse—or lack of discourse—within the broader subject of NATO/EU expansion to the Baltic states supports the latter presumption: nearly 30% of the articles and 13% of total codes for this sub-dataset lacked any sort of discernible bias, suggesting something more systematic than a number of rogue journalists working within the confines of a heavily censored political regime. However, this conclusion may also not be supported by the findings of chapters two and three, in which the theme of no discernable bias was only present in 15.69% and 14.29% of articles and constituted a mere 7.91% and 3.62% of codes, respectively.

Anti-Baltic Rhetoric

Anti-Baltic rhetoric refers to discourse aimed at portraying the Baltic governments or the titular populations of the Baltic states in a negative social, economic, or political light. Concerning the ascension of the Baltic states to NATO and the EU, this type of rhetoric most often takes the form of portraying the Baltic governments or titular populations as repressive against Russian speakers or biased against Russia and Russian media. For example, this *Kommersant* article from 8 April 2004 demonstrates how Russia views the Baltic states as violating the rights of Russian speakers:

> Among the most important issues that the President of the Russian Federation intends to raise at the negotiations are the following. Firstly, the situation of the Russian-speaking population in the Baltic countries. Russia intends to demand that NATO take more decisive measures to prevent infringement of the rights of the Russian-speaking population and raises this issue as one of the conditions for the development of constructive relations with the alliance (Volkhonskii, 2004).

Russia has in multiple instances asserted that countries in its "near abroad" are violating the human rights of the Russian-speaking diaspora, or "compatriots," particularly in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. The Kremlin has also notoriously asserted its role as protector of these "compatriots" abroad, fabricating allegations of discrimination and genocide against Russian speakers in order to justify its expansionist geopolitical aims (Feklyunina, 2016; Grigas, 2016). The Baltic states have been highly anti-Russian in their post-Soviet approach to citizenship and nation-building, which has seen Russia develop "Russkii Mir" and soft power policies based on countering this marginalization of diaspora (Coolican, 2021). There is also a subtle indication of hypocrisy at play here, with Russia demanding that NATO enact more measures to protect human rights knowing well that NATO markets itself as a values community committed to defending common values such as human rights, liberty, democracy, and the rule of law (Dagi, 2002). This sort of "whataboutism" when it comes to protecting the rights of the Russian diaspora is a particularly common trope in Russian media, especially dealing with the Bronze Night and Latvia's educational reforms, as will be discussed in chapters two and three.

When discussing NATO expansion, Russian media also tends to portray the Baltic governments as non-diplomatic, aggressive, or as Western puppets in a similar manner to how it portrays the EU and NATO as being needlessly uncooperative in diplomatic affairs. A *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* article from 30 March 2004 titled "The Baltic States under NATO's Wing" gives an impression of the Baltic states being willingly subordinate to NATO, which "plies" their airspace from the very first day of ascension:

> NATO F-16 combat aircraft will begin to ply the airspace of the three Baltic countries from April 2. That is, from the very first day of these republics' entry into the North Atlantic bloc. The parliaments of Lithuania and Estonia have already ratified documents on accession to the alliance (Sorokina, 2004).

The title of this article, which claims that the Baltic states are "under NATO's wing," reflects how instruments of Russian soft power attempt to portray the Baltic states as Western puppets that threaten Russian national security and, by extension, the rights of Russian "compatriots." The supposed willingness of the Baltic states to "submit" to NATO in tandem with the large amounts of rhetoric accusing the Baltic states of violating the rights of Russian speakers creates a propaganda scenario by which NATO can be viewed through the lens of repression and marginalization—the large Western military bloc which bolsters the suppressive Baltic states' militaries and ignores Russian cries for upholding human rights. Although there is no direct statement observed that the Baltic states' ascension to NATO will result in further discrimination against the Russian-speaking minority, the rampant fearmongering about NATO encroachment and the relatively large amount of material criticizing alleged human rights abuses in the Baltics in relation to NATO/EU expansion seems to heavily imply such. This sort of implication via context appears to be a notable feature of Russian media strategy; however, because the focus here is on context rather than substance, such an association cannot be made with empirical certainty.

Conclusion

The 2004 expansion of NATO and the EU cast a major strain in relations between the collective West and the Baltic states on the one hand and Russia on the other, with Russia employing every soft power technique at its disposal in a vain attempt to sow popular resistance to integration within the Baltic states, particularly through the media and with a target audience of the Russian-speaking minority. Russian media foremost highlighted the economic

disadvantages of joining the EU, quite surprisingly targeting the EU even more so than NATO despite mostly good relations with the EU throughout the past decade. This heavy-handed attack on the EU in relation to its recent expansion suggests a cherry-picking strategy of criticism based on the relevancy and immediacy of certain actors to the Kremlin's political goals. Russian media likewise portrays Russia as invested in defending its national security interests, viewing NATO as an encroaching threat and promoting a vague fearmongering strategy surrounding NATO expansion with the apparent intent of striking a resonant chord with the Baltic Russian-speaking minority. Similarly, it portrays the EU as needlessly uncooperative and undiplomatic towards Russia, most likely suggesting that the EU's one-sided approach towards Russia will translate into its dealings with its new member states and hinting at a shared collective identity among the Russian-speaking diaspora rooted in exclusion by Europe (such as in Kaliningrad). On the contrary, Russia is given the moral high ground in diplomatic affairs with the EU and NATO, and the strikingly large quantity of articles lacking any discernible bias could possibly suggest a systematic effort of the Kremlin to minimize popular perceptions of itself as heavily biased—however, this conclusion is not supported by the findings of following chapters. Finally, Russian media highlights alleged discrimination and violation of human rights against Russian speakers in the Baltic states in line with Russia's "compatriot" policy in its near abroad, and the prevalence of this type of rhetoric in relation to NATO and EU expansion seems to imply through context that integration will lead to further discrimination, although this is never explicitly stated. Disinformation seems to play a key role in each of these soft power strategies, such as the crude misquoting of economist Anders Aslund or the misleading notion that EU expansion would be harmful to the Russian economy. This unique blend of strategies employed by Russian media in relation to NATO and EU expansion speaks to the diverse nature of Russian

soft power, which presents multiple arguments in relation to one event; however, there are certain noteworthy consistencies over time which will be discussed in the succeeding chapters.

On a concluding note, it must be clarified that discerning bias is an incredibly subjective task, and as an independent researcher I am prone to human error which may not have accurately reflected the true sentiments of this dataset, especially in regards to articles that I have labeled as having no discernable bias. Nevertheless, if my discretion is at least somewhat accurate, it is important for scholars and policymakers to realize the extent to which Russian media distorts the truth and when it does not, and I believe these findings have at least contributed to painting a more complete assessment of this dynamic.

Chapter 2: The Bronze Night and Collective Memory

In 2007, Estonian prime minister Andrus Ansip, who was then running for reelection, decided to relocate the "Bronze Soldier," previously known as the Monument to the Liberators of Tallinn, from its location on Tõnismägi hill in the heart of Tallinn's Old Town to a military cemetery on the outskirts of the city. This move had been much anticipated by the titular Estonian population, many of whom viewed the monument as a staunch reminder of Soviet occupation and wanted to rid all notions of Soviet 'liberation' in accordance with Estonia's post-independence historical narrative. However, the statue's removal was widely received by the Russian-speaking community as yet another discriminatory gesture towards the country's Russian speakers, most of whom were not granted automatic citizenship upon independence and believed the state was trying to erase their cultural identity and memory (Torsti, 2008; Galbreath & Lašas, 2011; Lehti et al., 2013). Given that current research shows Russian speakers in Estonia express little loyalty or support for contemporary Russia, this event has been primarily viewed as a desperate cry of a minority to be recognized rather than a cultural proxy of Estonia-Russia relations (Lehit et al., 2013, p. 409). On the morning of April 26, 2007 construction crews set up a tent around the Bronze soldier to dismantle it, and riot barricades were also erected around the site. By dusk large crowds of Russian speakers had accumulated around the construction site to protest. As the evening progressed tensions mounted, leading to violent clashes with police and rampant looting and vandalism (BBC, 2007; Tanner, 2007).

During the course of two nights, over 1000 people were arrested, 150 were injured, and one man—a Russian-speaker by the name of Dmitri Ganin—was stabbed to death, although the

perpetrator was never found. While the Estonian authorities declared the cause of death to be stabbing by another rioter, Russian media also attributes the delayed response by Estonian emergency officials to his death (Kaiser, 2012; Maslov, 2007). The second day of rioting was also accompanied by a well-coordinated cyber attack on Estonian state and commercial infrastructure, which managed to shut down and deface the websites of multiple government departments. Although the source of the cyber security breach is known to have come from Russia, there is no conclusive evidence to support the notion that the Russian government coordinated the attack, with most analysts suspecting that independent "hacktivists" within Russia carried out the attack in response to the political events in Estonia (Council on Foreign Relations, 2007; Galbreath & Lašas, 2011).

The Bronze Night left a lasting impact on the relations between Estonia's titular and Russian-speaking populations and greatly strained Estonia-Russian diplomatic relations, with Estonia allegedly rising to the the number one most disliked country among Russians according to Russian polling sources (Antonov, 2007). It is perhaps the largest ethnic clash involving Russian speakers in the Baltic states as well as the most tense political situation in Estonia's recent history, which makes it an excellent case study for analyzing the soft power strategies of 21st century Russian news media. This chapter analyzes 51 Russian news articles related to the Bronze night from 26 April to 31 October of 2007 and argues that, with regard soft power strategies surrounding the Bronze Night, Russian media primarily emphasizes a disconnect in historical memory between the Baltic states and Russia by employing emotional rhetoric related to the combined legacies of the Soviet Union, shared culture and language, and fascism. I also argue that Russian media gives factually misleading information, portrays Estonia as a discriminatory police state, denies allegations of the subsequent cyber attack, and—to a lesser extent—practices narrative manipulation and inconsistency over time.

Findings

A thematic analysis of 51 Russian news articles related to the Bronze Night from 26 April to 31 October 2007 reveals a prevalence of four primary themes throughout the data. The four themes are: anti-Baltic rhetoric, pro-Russian political rhetoric, pro-minority rhetoric, no discernable political rhetoric, as well as three other present but statistically insignificant themes. Of the four primary themes found in this sub-dataset concerning the Bronze Night, anti-Baltic rhetoric is by far the most recurring, present in 80.39% of the total articles related to the Bronze Night and constituting 63.31% of the total codes for this sub-dataset (Figures 2.1, 2.2). Within this theme, the most popular codes are: rhetoric portraying the Baltic governments as disrespectful to the memories of the Second World War, particularly with respect to the Estonian parliament's decision to relocate the Bronze Soldier (43.14% of articles; 15.83% of codes), attempting to portray the Baltic governments as non-diplomatic, aggressive, or as Western puppets in international affairs (33.33% of articles; 12.23% of codes), portraying the Baltic government and titular populations as repressive against Russian speakers or biased against Russia and Russian media (29.41% of articles; 10.79% of codes). Other notable codes within this theme include: portraying popular resistance to relocating the Bronze Soldier (25.49% of articles; 9.35% of codes), portraying the Baltic governments or population as fascist or as otherwise too nationalistic (19.61% of articles; 7.19% of codes), and stating or suggesting that other European countries, politicians, and political bodies (including the US and UN) do not support the actions of the Baltic governments (9.80% of articles; 3.60% of codes).

The second most recurring theme throughout the sub-dataset relating to the Bronze Night is pro-Russian political rhetoric, or rhetoric aimed at portraying the Russian government or society in a positive or benevolent light, often in comparison to 'Western' European or American governments or society. This theme is present in 37.25% of articles and constitutes 14.39% of the

total codes. The most recurring codes within this theme are: attempting to present history from the perspective of the Russian government in order to justify historical events (19.61% of articles, 7.19% of codes) and portraying the Russian government and politicians as benevolent or just, defending them from wrongdoing and/or denying allegations (17.65% of articles; 6.47% of codes).

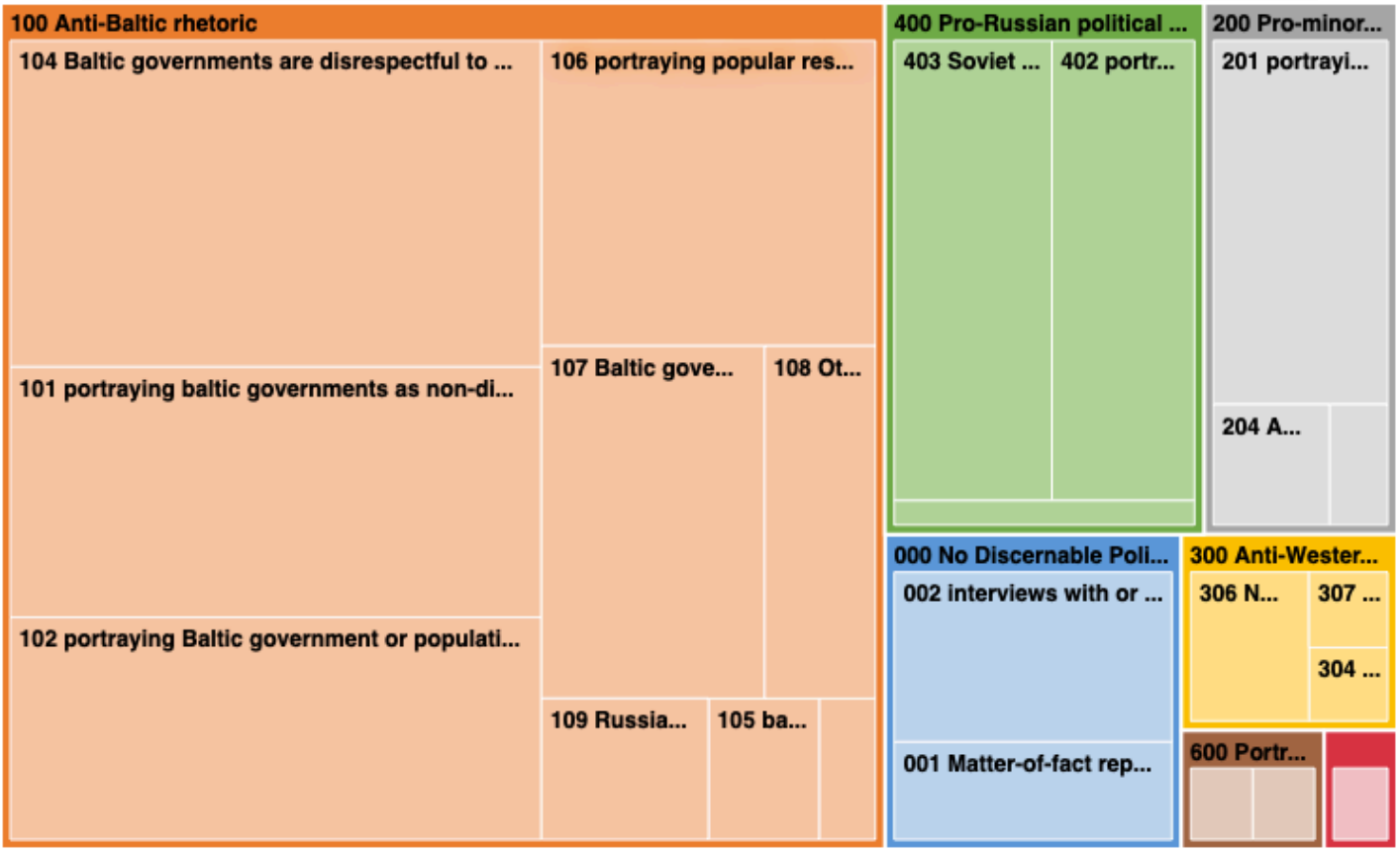
The third most common theme in the sub-dataset regarding the Bronze Night is pro-minority rhetoric, or rhetoric aimed at portraying the Russian-speaking minority in the Baltics in a positive light in comparison to the native population, which is present in 21.57% of articles and accounts for 8.63% of the total codes. This rhetoric can also consist of simply advocating for minority rights. The most popular codes in this theme are: the portrayal of Russian protestors or pro-Russian political movements and activists as righteous or justified in their actions (17.65% of articles; 6.47% of codes) and advocating for the protection of the Russian minority (3.92% of articles; 1.44% of codes).

The fourth most common theme in the data surrounding the Bronze Night is no discernable political rhetoric, present in 15.69% of articles and constitutes 7.91% of the share of total codes. The most common codes for this theme are interviews with Baltic or other European politicians (13.73% of articles, 5.04% of codes) and matter-of-fact reporting (7.84% of articles; 2.88% of codes).

The remainder of the themes throughout this sub-dataset are relatively infrequent, with the largest—anti-Western political/economic rhetoric—comprising only 9.80% of articles and 3.60% of the total codes for the entire theme (including child codes). Furthermore—and unsurprisingly—portrayals of the Russian government or politicians in a negative manner, either in the sense that political and economic support from Moscow is not useful for Baltic Russians, that the Russian government is intentionally sowing discord, or that the Russian government is

repressive against the Baltic states or its own people, were almost entirely absent from this body of data, being present in only 1 article and comprising 1.44% of total codes. An even smaller share of the theme portraying the Baltic governments or Western institutions and countries in a positive manner was recorded, again present in only 1 article and standing at only 0.72% of total codes. However, the relatively small percentages of these two themes is consistent throughout all three chapters, which is likewise unsurprising.

Figure 2.1: Hierarchy Chart of Themes and Child Codes (Bronze Night)



Analysis

Anti-Baltic rhetoric

As discussed in chapter one, anti-Baltic rhetoric refers to rhetoric aimed at portraying the Baltic governments or the titular populations of the Baltic states in a negative social, economic, or political light. With regards to the Bronze Night, this kind of rhetoric most often portrays the Baltic governments and titular populations as repressive against Russian speakers or biased against Russia or Russian media. A *Moskovsky Komsomolets* opinion piece from May 7th 2007 demonstrates the emotional sentiment projected by this type of rhetoric:

> Do you realize that if it were not for the ordinary Soviet people to whom the monument was erected, even in 2007 Europe could have been under Nazi rule? Any civilized nation respects the elderly. Do you understand that moving the monument is an emotional shock specifically for veterans who, due to their age, are already feeling less than stellar (Rostovskii, 2007)?

This is a staunch example of the dissonance in historical memory between Russia and the titular Baltic population, who use the language of "occupation" instead of "liberation" when referring to the 1944 reoccupation of the Baltic states by the Soviet Union. However, Russian arguments related to historical memory are primarily based on emotional appeals, particularly ones that attempt to elicit guilt and shame for disrespecting the legacy of the Soviet fallen and veterans of the "Great Patriotic War." This disconnect in historical memory is a recurrent subject not only with regard to the Bronze Night but also in Russian media discourse concerning Latvia's 2018 educational reforms, as we will see in Chapter 3. The ideological battle over collective memory reflects how Baltic and Russian constructions of state- and nationhood are inherently antagonistic, reflecting a broader erosion of Baltic-Russian relations since Baltic independence (Berg & Ehin, 2016).

Russian soft power also portrays the Baltic governments as non-diplomatic, aggressive, or as Western puppets in international affairs, such as this excerpt from a *Pravda* article from

May 4th, 2007: "The reaction of Brussels and Washington to the scandalous events in Tallinn is not surprising: after all, Estonia, like the other Baltic republics, has actually turned into obedient American puppets" (Morozova, 2007). Likewise, an *Argumenty i Fakty* article from 9 May 2007 evokes rumors and speculation to portray Estonia and the Batlic states as aggressive and uncooperative towards Russia—and even Germany—in the context of the recently passed upheaval in Tallinn:

> In such a nervous situation, the Russia-European Union summit runs the risk of being held in Samara on May 17-18. According to rumors, Estonia, as a member of the EU, insists on a "hard beating of the Russians" … It is possible that Tallinn, through the hands of the EU, will try to block Russia's entry into the WTO. The Baltic states may also interfere with the construction of the North European Gas Pipeline (NEGP) along the bottom of the Baltic Sea. After the head of the operating company SEG G. Schröder (prime minister of Germany) stood up for the monument to the Soldier-Liberator, Estonian Prime Minister A. Ansip allegedly refused to discuss the pipe route with him (Iur'ev, 2007).

The indication that the Baltic states are political puppets as well as the propagation of rumors that Estonia will behave exceedingly antagonistic toward Russia at the EU-Russia summit demonstrate how Russia is attempting to portray Estonia as undiplomatic, especially in comparison to Germany. The secret to Russian soft power, however, are the details it chooses to leave out. Estonia openly opposed the construction of the pipeline for security and economic reasons. Nord Stream, which bypassed several transit countries and allowed Russia to sell gas directly to Germany, allowed Russia to choose whether its limited amounts of gas should be sold to Germany and the Netherlands or to Estonia, Latvia, etc., thus weakening the bargaining position of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Belarus and Ukraine vis-à-vis Russia and disturbing the regional balance of power. More importantly, Estonia was opposed to European energy dependence on Russia, which it interpreted as a threat to European security (Hedenskog & Lavrenyuk, 2007). This is especially given the fact that Gerhard Schröder, although no longer chancellor in 2007, was the chairman of the board of Nord Stream, a company owned by

majority Russian shareholders, and was heavily involved in Gazprom, a Russian majority-state owned energy company and the largest company in Russia by revenue (Freifeld, 2009). This also explains why Estonia was the first nation around the Baltic Sea to hinder the pipeline's construction, rejecting an application by Nord Stream AG to survey the seabed in its economic zone in September 2007 (Mardiste, 2007). The fact that Schröder stood up for the Bronze Soldier, a symbol of Russian occupation, signaled a clear threat to Estonian security in the eyes of prime minister Ansip and more accurately explains why he refused to meet with Schröder to discuss the pipeline.

Within the broader theme of anti-Baltic rhetoric, Russian soft power especially tends to portray the Baltic government and populations as repressive against Russian speakers, often citing incidents of political discrimination and police brutality against Russian speakers, as demonstrated by an *Argumenty i Fakty* article from 2 May 2007:

> On the night of last Thursday, a monument to the liberating soldier was fenced off in Tallinn… At the same time, a peaceful demonstration of Russian-speaking residents of the Estonian capital was harshly dispersed… In clashes with the police, more than 40 people were injured, more than 300 were detained, and one of the victims died. According to some reports, the young man was beaten to death by police (Sivkova, 2007).

This description correlates with Grigas' (2012) observation that Russian language media tried to shape the perceptions of Estonian Russian minorities regarding the Soviet monument relocation in Tallinn, arguably helping incite the subsequent riots by providing false accounts of the events (for instance, reporting that the monument had been destroyed by the Estonian authorities). Other Russian media reports also attributed Dmitri Ganin's death to the late arrival of emergency officials, which allegedly took over an hour to respond (Maslov, 2007). Painting the Baltic governments as discriminatory regimes with rampant and systemic police brutality

against Russian speakers is an extremely common trope within Russian media covering the Bronze Night as well as the to-be-discussed 2018 educational reforms in Latvia.

Pro-Russian Political Rhetoric

As mentioned in chapter one, pro-Russian political rhetoric aims to portray the Russian government or society in a positive or benevolent light, usually in comparison to the Baltic states or the broader West, including the EU and the US. In relation to the Bronze Night, this type of rhetoric most commonly takes the form of presenting history from the Russian government's perspective in order to justify historical events and current political developments, which I have termed as "Soviet apologetic" narratives. For example, a *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* article from June 28th, 2007 states that Estonians were "loyal" to invading Soviet troops, implies a sense of shared nostalgia for Soviet times and—most ubiquitously—uses the language of "liberation" when referring to the post-war Soviet occupation:

> When Soviet troops entered Estonia in 1940 under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, they were greeted with relative loyalty (Russians appeared in Estonia under Peter I; under Alexander III, Russian instead of German became the state language here)... Of course, not everyone who came here every year on May 9th came to celebrate only the Victory of 1945. Someone was nostalgic for the times when Estonia was Soviet…. But a very humane, unpretentiously mournful monument, created by the Estonian sculptor Enn Roos, is by no means dedicated to those soldiers who entered Estonia in 1940, but to those who liberated it from fascism in 1944 (Kantor, 2007).

Once again we observe a staunch appeal to emotion, underscoring a shared Russian-Baltic historical and cultural identity as well as "nostalgia" for Soviet times. Russian soft power often fixates on the collective memory of the Soviet Union's legacy during the Second World War, attempting to elicit guilt from anyone who attempts to remove Soviet statues (or erect nationalist ones) and casting them as fascist sympathizers (Kattago, 2009; Zhurzhenko, 2015). In the same manner, Russian soft power presents its own version of history where the Soviet Union was a liberator from European fascism and there is a collective nostalgia for the

Soviet Union, even after acknowledging the fact that there were mass deportations in the Baltic States during the first years of the Soviet occupation. The last sentence of the excerpt in particular demonstrates the contradictory nature of Russian historical memory, claiming that the monument is only representative of Soviet "liberators" in 1944 and not the original Soviet invaders of 1940 as if the Soviet Union had somehow changed its imperialist geopolitical agenda by the end of the war. Russia likewise considers the Baltics the "black sheep" of Europe with regard to reconciling the legacy of Nazism, focusing on the fact that there are monuments to SS legionaries in Estonia and parades for SS veterans in Latvia despite local interpretations of political pragmatism when siding with the Germans in order to prevent a Soviet reoccupation (Jurkynas, 2014).

Pro-Russian political rhetoric also takes a more direct form by portraying the Russian government and politicians as benevolent or just and defending them from allegations, as was also observed with regard to NATO and EU expansion. In relation to the Bronze Night, this discourse usually depicts Russian politicians virtue signaling to the monument's legacy, highlights how Russian politicians laid wreaths on the tomb of the liberator soldier and helped return the exhumed ashes to the families, and denies allegations of Russia's involvement in the subsequent cyber attack. A *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* article from 4 May 2007 demonstrates the indignation with which Moscow public officials condemned the actions of Tallinn, attempting to appear as having the moral high ground and being on the "right side" of history:

> The civil positions of Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov and Governor of the Moscow Region Boris Gromov in relation to the dismantling of the memorial to the Soldier-Liberator in Tallinn completely coincided. Luzhkov called the action, "which was carried about by force and resulted in human casualties," blasphemous… "We regard it as an act of state vandalism, as a blatant act of mockery of the memory of the fallen soldiers of many nationalities who liberated the world from fascism" … "We fully support the initiative taken by Muscovites to boycott Estonian goods… We also call on state and municipal organizations of Russia to freeze all forms of financial, economic, business and cultural interaction with state organizations of Estonia" … All sensible political and

> public figures, representatives of culture and business, and all those who value the memory of the victims of fascism, according to the Moscow mayor, must demand the immediate restoration of the memorial to the Soldier-Liberator in Tallinn (Protsenko, 2007).

This oversaturated appeal to ethos not only once again underscores the disconnect in historical memory between Russia and the Baltic states but also showcases how Russian media presents Russian politicians: assertive, embodying the same popular values as their constituents, and having empathy for the victims of fascism as well as respect for their memory. Such virtue signaling gives the Kremlin a source of moral legitimacy even if the majority of Russian speakers in Estonia do not feel politically or culturally attached to Russia. Although I consider this excerpt as "pro-Russian" as it is attempting to defend the moral image of the Russian government in addition to scrutinizing the Estonian government, it nevertheless embodies a certain "negative" and defensive characteristic which appears to be representative of Russian soft power as a whole. This observation is reflected in the data regarding the Bronze Night, which is overwhelmingly "anti-Baltic rhetoric" (63.31%) rather than "pro-Russian" (14.39%) or "pro-minority" (8.63%) (Figures 2.1, 2.2).

Pro-Minority Rhetoric

Pro-minority rhetoric aims at portraying the Russian-speaking minority in a positive light in comparison to the titular population, which can include advocating for Russian-speaking minority rights more generally. Central to this discourse are claims and implications that the rioters during Bronze Night were "peaceful protesters" or that pro-Russian movements are justified in their actions, among other arguments. For instance, a *Kommersant* article from 27 April 2007—the second day of rioting in Tallinn—interviews members of a nationalistic Russian youth group protesting outside of the Estonian embassy in Moscow, again employing the language of "liberation" in reference to the monument: (201)

> Yesterday, activists of the youth movement "Young Guard of United Russia" held a picket at the Estonian Embassy in Moscow, protesting against the intentions of the Estonian authorities to demolish the monument to the Soviet Liberator Soldier in Tallinn and rebury the ashes of Soviet soldiers. Young people stood at the diplomatic mission with flags and posters "Hands off the Russian soldier," "Hitler is the hero of Estonia," "Let us protect the memory of the liberating soldiers." "We are protesting against the reburial of the ashes of Soviet soldiers from Tõnismägi Hill, a holy place for veterans of the Great Patriotic War," said Alexei Shaposhnikov, head of the Moscow headquarters of the Young Guard. "The Estonian authorities are behaving blasphemously on the eve of the celebration of May 9, the Great Victory Day." "We will continue to keep watch at the walls of the Estonian embassy and will not allow the Bronze Soldier to be dismantled and the memory of our grandfathers desecrated," he warned ("Molodezhnye dvizheniia zazhgli…," 2007).

Once again we observe a conflict of historical memory involving the legacy of the Soviet Union as well as appeals to emotion and guilt in relocating the monument, invoking accusations of fascism and blasphemy against the Estonian authorities and titular population.

The second code of this theme, advocating for the protection of the Russian minority, is only present in 2 out of the 51 articles for this sub-dataset (1.44% of total codes), which is a surprisingly low figure considering how critical Russian media is of the alleged discrimination against Russian speakers. Perhaps the only substantive example of this code can be found in an *Izvestia* article from May 4th 2007 which draws on an Amnesty International report to bring awareness to the situation of Russian speakers in Estonia and lists the demands of the report, juxtaposing the alleged discrimination taking place in Estonia against the human-rights orientated values of the EU:

> Now Estonian human rights activists are collecting data on the massive violation of human rights that occurred during the dispersal of demonstrators at the Bronze Soldier. The goal is to demand a full investigation with the participation of international observers and experts. Russia, human rights activists believe, could become one of the initiators of such an investigation or, at least, send its specialists in the field of international law to help. And the maximum idea of this process is to focus primarily the attention of the European Union on the infringement of the rights of the Russian-speaking minority. The same Amnesty International report explains how to demand from official Tallinn not abstract justice, but concrete measures. For example, insist on recognizing as citizens of Estonia all those who permanently resided on its territory before 1991. This, human

> rights activists admit, will not solve all the problems of the Russian-speaking minority, but without such a step no movement forward is possible at all (Grigor'eva, 2007).

The narrative conveyed here that the EU is some sort of bastion of human rights that has the potential to bring the discriminatory Baltic states to justice diverges sharply with what was observed in 2004, when Russian media viewed the EU as nothing more than an encroaching Western threat that endangered the economic stability and political autonomy of the Russian diaspora. This is one of the key features of Russian soft power—narrative manipulation based on who or what is the primary target of criticism at a given time—and it demonstrates that Russian soft power narratives are inconsistent over time, something which will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 3. This is further supported by the fact that anti-Western political/economic rhetoric—which made up over half (53.62%) of the total codes for Chapter 1—comprises only 9.80% of articles and 3.60% of the total codes related to the Bronze Night, an extremely stark contrast. However, the subject matter of this chapter is also markedly different: whereas when dealing with the enlargement of NATO and the EU Russian media turned its attention towards attacking these institutions, when focusing on a domestic situation within the Baltic states Russian media naturally sets its attention towards attacking these individual states rather than the collective 'West'. In fact, Russian media will often portray 'Western' institutions such as the EU and Amnesty International (as well as 'Western' values such as emphasis on human rights) in a positive light in order to vilify its more immediate enemies when convenient, as exemplified by the *Izvestiia* article from 4 May 2007.

Furthermore—and unsurprisingly—portrayals of the Russian government or politicians in a negative manner, either in the sense that political and economic support from Moscow is not useful for Baltic Russians, that the Russian government is intentionally sowing discord, or that the Russian government is repressive against the Baltic states or its own people, were almost

entirely absent from this body of data, being present in only 1 article and comprising 1.44% of total codes. An even smaller share of the theme portraying the Baltic governments or Western institutions and countries in a positive manner was recorded, again present in only 1 article and standing at only 0.72% of total codes. However, the relatively small percentages of these two themes is consistent throughout all three chapters, which is quite expected.

Conclusion

The Bronze Night is undoubtedly one of the most contentious events involving Baltic Russian speakers in modern history, opening up deep historical wounds and leaving a lasting scar on the relations between the native Estonian and Russian speakers for years to come. Russian media was quick to pounce on the opportunity to create soft power narratives during the upheaval and attempt a propaganda victory, employing emotion and shame to discredit the Estonian government for disrespecting the memory of Soviet veterans and fallen "liberators" of WWII as well as for encouraging fascism and nationalism. Emphasizing this disconnect in historical memory is the most notable soft power strategy of Russian media covering the Bronze Night, and this sort of emotional rhetoric related to the combined legacies of the Soviet Union, shared culture and language, and fascism is prevalent in other post-Soviet states which allows us to paint a more concise picture of Russian soft power more generally. Additionally, Russian media concerning the Bronze Night once again gives factually misleading information—such as leaving out key details regarding Estonia's objection to the Nord Stream pipeline other than Schröder standing up for the Bronze Soldier—attempts to portray Estonia as an apartheid-esque police state that brutally targets Russian-speaking protestors, and paints sympathetic pictures of virtue-signaling Russian politicians who gallantly denounce the "blasphemous" Estonian authorities Finally, Russian media changes and manipulates its narrative over time to adapt to changing circumstances, fiercely criticizing the EU for expanding in 2004 yet promoting it as a

means of countering “human rights abuses” in the Baltic states in 2007, although to a much lesser extent regarding the Bronze Night than Latvia’s educational reforms, as I will discuss

Chapter 3: Latvia's Educational Reforms and Marginalization Narratives

As is widely known, after the collapse of the Soviet Union most Russian speakers chose to stay in the new Baltic republics rather than return to Russia due to the comparatively higher standard of living and number of economic opportunities in the Baltics (Raun, 2009). At the same time, the Baltic governments were attempting to reinstate their native languages as the dominant language of public and professional life, with Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians viewing language as central to national identity and the preponderance of Russian as a threat to local cultural identity and sovereignty. This created a conflict between the titular populations, who were on a decolonizing mission, and the Russian speakers, who felt they should also have a right to education in their native language as in the past and that the Russian language was central to their cultural identity (Silova, 2002). Beginning in 1999, Latvia (which had the largest number of Russian speakers—41.2%) began bilingual education in Russian primary schools, with the official plan being to make Russian secondary schools accept 100% Latvian education by 2004. Likewise, Estonia in 2007 set a goal of having 60% of its total curriculum taught in Estonian over the course of five academic years (Dilāns & Zepa 2015). In contrast, Lithuania did not use bilingual education to make Russian schools adopt the titular language instruction. This has to do with the relatively small number of Russian speakers and other linguistic minorities in Lithuania (roughly 14% total as of 2021, including Russian speakers), although there are a good number of ethnic schools (e.g., Belarusian and Polish), with Russian schools on the decrease (Pavlenko, 2008; *Housing and Population Census*, 2021)

As of September 2004, state-funded minority language schools in Latvia have been required to teach 60% of all curriculum material in Latvian and 40% in minority languages (mostly Russian), a reform which brought about backlash from the Russian-speaking community. Beginning in 2003, numerous rallies were held to protest against the reform that took effect in September 2004 (Galbreath & Galvin, 2005). On 22 March 2018, the Latvian Saeima adopted amendments to the Education Law and the General Education Law, which foresaw a gradual transition to instruction in Latvian in both state and private schools of upper secondary education and an increase of the proportion of the Latvian language applied in minority education programs implemented in state schools at the level of pre-school and basic education. This amendment projected a 100% share of curriculum material to be in Latvian by grade 12 (European Commission for Democracy through Law, 2020). In 2022, Latvia formulated and adopted a legislation amending the country's education system that requires all pre-school and school institutions—including bilingual institutions and those operating in minority languages—to transition to instruction exclusively in Latvian. The law aims at transitioning the language of instruction in schools and preschool institutions to be only in Latvian by September 2025, starting with preschools and school grades 1, 4 and 7 as of September 2023 (Latvia: UN experts concerned about severe curtailment of minority … 2023). Both the 2018 and 2022 reforms have been met with resistance and demonstrations from the Russian-speaking community, particularly from parents of Russian-speaking children (Vohra, 2023).

This chapter analyzes Russian media content in Latvia from the time of the 2018 education reforms in order to gauge Russian soft power strategies in the Baltic region. I chose this time frame in order to evaluate Russian media strategies from more recent years, as opposed to chapters one and two which analyze events from 2004 and 2007, respectively. Although Estonia has also taken measures to gradually phase out the use of the Russian language in all

educational institutions, Latvia's attempts at de-Russification in education precede Estonia's by several years and have received more media attention, which is why I have decided to focus on Latvia as a case study for this chapter. This approach also narrows the search criteria when looking for primary sources, thus yielding more accurate results. I argue that Russian soft power strategies surrounding Latvia's 2018 educational reforms primarily attempt to construct a separate collective identity for the Baltic Russian-speaking diaspora, a strategy which is distinct from pursuing direct loyalty to Russia and follows from the already limited receptiveness of the Baltic populations to Russian discourse. To implement this strategy, Russian media projects political narratives to its target audience which are factually misleading and inconsistent over time and which underscore the incompatible identities and historical narratives of Russia and the Baltic states.

Findings

A thematic analysis of 35 Russian news articles related to the education reforms in Latvia from 23 January to 30 October 2018 reveals the dominant prevalence of four primary themes: anti-Baltic rhetoric, pro-minority rhetoric, pro-Russian political rhetoric, and anti-Western political or economic rhetoric. The most dominant theme is anti-Baltic rhetoric, which is present in 91.43% of the articles and constitutes 55.07% of the total codes for this sub-dataset (Figures 3.1 & 3.2). Within the broader theme of anti-Baltic rhetoric, the most common codes are: portraying Baltic governments or populations as repressive against Russian speakers or biased against Russia and Russian media (82.86% of articles; 21.01% of codes); the Baltic governments do not reflect the values of the EU, or the legality of their laws is questioned (42.86% of articles; 10.87% of codes); and portraying popular resistance to 'de-Russification' (42.86% of articles; 10.87% of codes).

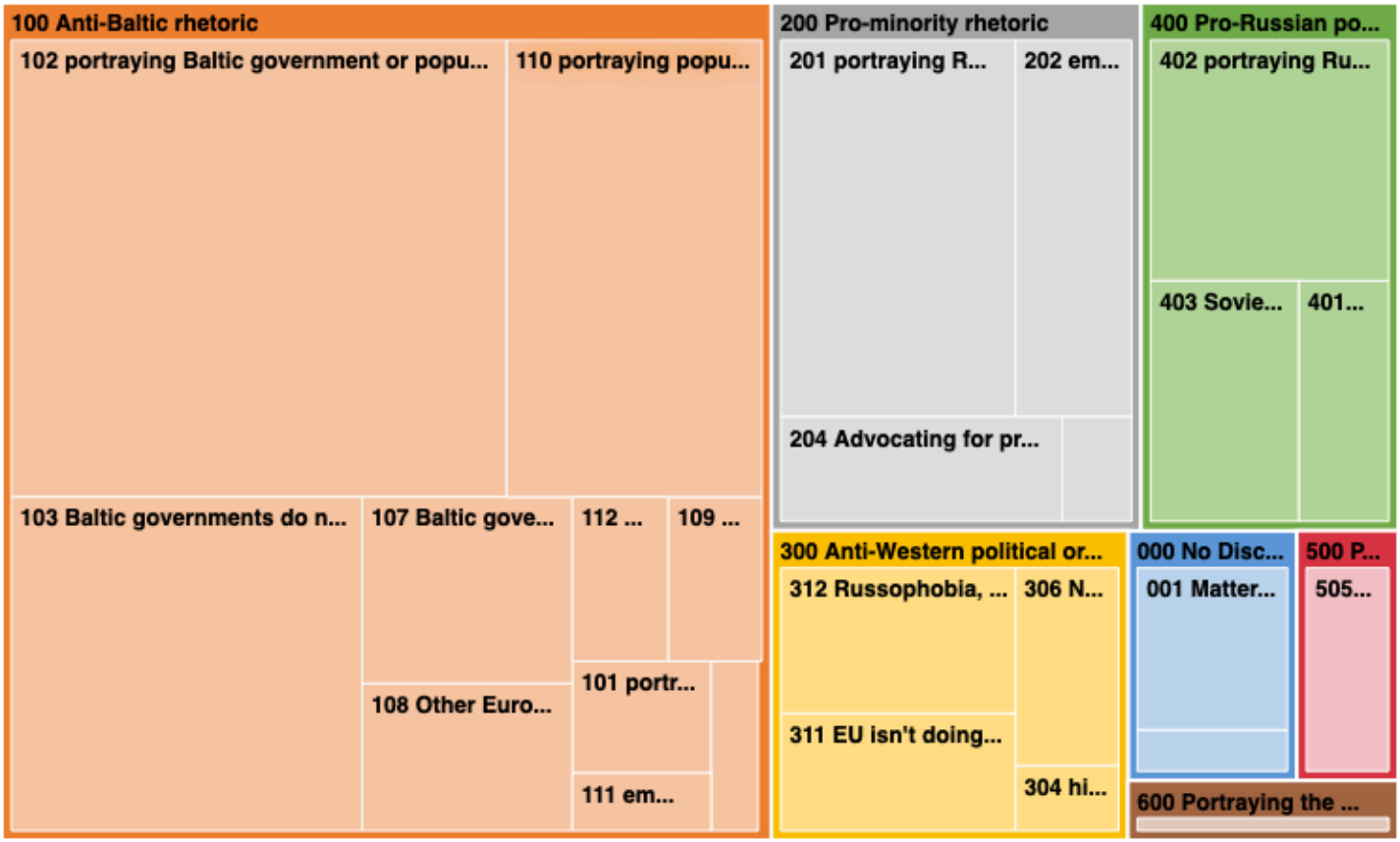
The second most common theme in this sub-dataset related to Latvia's educational reforms is pro-minority rhetoric, which is present in 45.71% of articles and constitutes 16.67% of total codes for this sub-dataset. Within this theme, the most popular codes are: portraying Russian-speaking protestors or pro-Russian movements as justified in their actions (34.29% of articles; 8.70% of codes), emphasis on education in the minority language (17.14% of articles; 4.35% of codes), and advocating for the protection of the Russian-speaking minority (11.43% of articles; 2.90% of codes).

The third most common theme is pro-Russian political rhetoric, which is present in 31.43% of articles and constitutes 11.59% of total codes for this sub-dataset. The three most common codes within this theme are: portraying the Russian government and politicians as benevolent or just, defending them from wrongdoing and/or denying allegations (22.86% of articles, 5.80% of codes); attempting to present history from the Russian government's perspective and/or justifying historical events from a Russian/Soviet perspective—'Soviet apologetic' (14.29% of articles; 3.62% of codes); and 'compatriot' rhetoric (8.57% of articles; 2.17% of codes).

Finally, the fourth most common theme is anti-Western political or economic rhetoric, which is aimed at portraying Western political and economic institutions as well as Western countries in a negative or threatening light, with 'Western' mostly referring to the EU and the US. This theme is present in 28.57% of the articles and constitutes 9.42% of the codes for this sub-dataset. The two most common codes for this theme are: Russophobia, anti-Russian hysteria and double standards against Russia and the Russian language (14.29% of articles; 3.62% of codes) and the EU isn't doing enough to counter discrimination against Russian speakers in the Baltic states (11.43% of articles, 2.90% of codes).

The three other less prominent themes present in this sub-dataset include: no discernable political rhetoric (14.29% of articles; 3.62% of codes); portraying the Batic governments or Western institutions and countries in a positive manner (8.57% of articles; 2.17% of codes); and portraying the Russian government or politicians in a negative manner (5.71% of articles; 1.45% of codes). These themes, although present, are rare statistical outliers, and I do not believe they warrant a more in-depth analysis.

Figure 3.1: Hierarchy Chart of Themes with Child Codes (2018 Latvian Educational Reforms)



Analysis

Anti-Baltic Rhetoric

As I have previously discussed, anti-Baltic rhetoric involves portraying the titular populations of the Baltic states or the Baltic governments in a negative light, which can take both international and domestic forms. The most popular form of this type of rhetoric concerning Latvia's educational reforms was—unsurprisingly—portraying the Baltic governments or populations as repressive against Russian speakers or biased against Russia and Russian media:

> And they are plotting against Russia because it is big, strong, and inconvenient. Any techniques are used. In the Baltics, all schools—even those where Russian-speaking children study—are going to be transferred to Latvian from September 1, 2019. And Russian children will be forced to learn a language that ends 100 kilometers from their home! Because the task is to oust the Russians from Latvia, from Estonia. They are trying to do the same thing with the Russian language in Ukraine… Realizing that Russia cannot be dealt with militarily today, they are fighting us through culture (Iur'ev, 2018).

Appeals to emotion are particularly salient regarding the issue of education as it involves children, who have no power to change their native language and whose opportunities and academic performance will presumably be hindered as a result of this legislation. Just as Russian media employed fearmongering tactics regarding NATO expansion, implying a Western "invasion" when assessing the treatment of national minorities, Russian journalists will not shy away from a loaded appeal to ethos. The reference to Ukraine as well as the implication of a culture war also speaks to the interconnected nature of Russian soft power by suggesting a unity between all members of the Russian diaspora, or "Russkii Mir" (Coolican, 2021).

Claims that the Baltic governments do not reflect the values of the EU by discriminating against national minorities are similarly ubiquitous:

> In which OSCE member countries is the situation with infringement of the rights of national minorities the most tense today? Ukraine and Latvia are the main reference points that are now designated… In general, the Baltic states are a knot that needs to be untied with the help of international institutions and international influence on local authorities. These countries are trying to hide behind the European Union and NATO,

> which, relatively speaking, do not allow their own to be offended. But this is not about solidarity. Here we are talking about more serious things, about the violation of fundamental norms of international law and human rights to freedom of choice, freedom of movement, freedom of education in one's native language, and so on. In addition, if you consider yourself such active Europeans, you, on the contrary, should set an example in applying these norms to national minorities (Zabrodin, 2018).

Once again the reference to Ukraine hints at a shared sense of "compatriotism" intended to unite the collective diaspora. But more importantly, we observe a stark contrast in the rhetoric of Russian media from 2004, when the European Union and NATO were labeled only as encroaching threats to Russia and the "Russian world" and when "international institutions and international influence on local (Baltic) authorities" was precisely the object of criticism rather than something conducive to the interests of Russian speakers. This example highlights the extent to which international institutions have become a battleground in Russia-Baltic relations, with Russia effectively "picking and choosing" when it wishes to criticize or espouse the ideals of the EU depending on who is the object of criticism. As Berg & Ehin (2016) accurately observe: "European institutions have become an important arena on which the Baltic-Russian identity conflict is played out, as both Russia and the Baltic states strive for the international recognition of their constitutive historical narratives and concepts of self, while denying the Europeanness of each other" (pp. 1-2).

Perhaps the most effective means of propaganda is creating an artificial image of popularity, and Russian media undoubtedly attempts to depict popular resistance to the "de-Russification" happening in Latvia:

> In April, Latvian President Raimonds Vējonis signed amendments to the education law, providing for a gradual transition of education in all schools to the Latvian language… The reform caused protests. Parents of children from Russian schools went to rallies and pickets, and on May 1, five thousand people marched through the center of Riga. The next protest against the reform of schools of national minorities is scheduled for June 2…. [five thousand] is a large number for Riga, but not comparable to the tens of thousands of people who took to the streets after the 2004 school reform in Latvia (Epifanova, 2018).

Despite the fact that the actual reported number of protestors at these demonstrations is ambiguous, these descriptions should be taken into account in light of existing research that suggests Russian speakers have low receptiveness to the narratives of "Russkii Mir" nationalism and display stronger civic and economic ties to their nationalizing states even if they have stronger cultural ties to Russia (Cheskin, 2015; Kallas, 2016). Although there is certainly legitimate protest over the language reforms, this should not necessarily be interpreted as some sort of loyalty to Russia or a widespread insurgency against the Latvian government.

Pro-Minority Rhetoric

Pro-minority rhetoric is aimed at portraying the Russian-speaking minority in a positive light, oftentimes in comparison to the titular population or in the context of advocating for minority rights more broadly. With regard to Latvia's educational reforms, this kind of rhetoric most often includes portraying Russian protestors or pro-Russian movements as justified in their actions, as martyrs, or as people with whom one should morally sympathize: "Representatives of the Russian community in Latvia, in a conversation with me, sadly reported: 'We will continue to fight, but our people are already tired, although they feel resentment…'" (Zotov, 2018). This rhetoric more often than not involves supposedly innocent protestors who are targeted by a repressive police force yet bravely persist in the face of adversity:

> Latvian social activists express serious concern that the human rights situation in their country has deteriorated sharply in recent months. According to them, the authorities are responding to peaceful protests against education reform with a campaign of forceful pressures. "Two activists of the movement who spoke out in defense of Russian schools were taken into custody for public speeches that had nothing to do with violence. At least five others have been summoned for questioning by security police on criminal matters," the appeal says (Trifonova, 2018).

Portraying the Russian diaspora as resilient in the face of tyranny builds a sense of collective identity as well as resentment against the "nationalizing state" (Cheskin, 2015). This collective identity can additionally manifest itself in the form of a unique nationalism centered

around the local ethnic group as opposed to loyalty to the "ethnic homeland." The concept of a "Russian-speaking" proto-nationality was pioneered by Laitin (1998) who noted: "As Russians in the near abroad decide whether to assimilate, to organize politically as Russians, or to return to their putative homeland, the basic identity categories that guided them in the past become eroded. Russians … are inventing new categories of identity to help them make sense of who they are. One self-description becoming pervasive in all [Baltic] republics is that of a Russian-speaking population" (p. 190). Likewise, Trimbach (2015) observed how residents of the Estonian city of Narva—which borders Russia and consists of a dominant Russian-speaking population, many of whom are non-citizens—are not necessarily loyal to either Estonia or to Russia but instead practice a unique form of localism. They are not significantly swayed by Russian political narratives because they are aware of the poor living conditions in Russia and are uninterested in moving there, especially given that the impoverished Russian city of Ivangorod is located directly across the Narva river. However, they are nonetheless dismayed at the Estonian state as they feel they have lost the opportunity to gain citizenship after independence, resulting in the sort of unique proto-nationalism described by Laitin (1998). Pro-minority rhetoric attempts to compensate for this lack of direct loyalty to Russia by kindling a sense of collective identity among the Russian-speaking diaspora that is united against the oppressive post-Soviet republics, a strategy which is the second-best and likely most feasible option for the Kremlin than pursuing direct loyalty.

Pro-minority rhetoric also emphasizes education in the minority Russian language and highlights the aspirations and successes of the pro-Russian movement in the Baltics as opposed to simply underscoring the existence of "discrimination." For instance, a *Moskovskii Komsomolets* article from 22 May 2018 interviews Miroslav Mitrofanov, co-chairman of the

board of the Russian Union party of Latvia, about an appeal signed by members of the European Parliament demanding the abolition of the school reform in Latvia:

> Without exaggeration, we can say that collecting signatures from European deputies is a great victory and helps in our struggle…. In addition, we are launching an information campaign to highlight problems with Russian education in Latvia. We're going to attract the attention of the UN, the OSCE mission and the human rights organization Amnesty International. Our task is to break the information barrier that now exists (Zelenskaia, 2018).

Considering the aforementioned idea of a Russian-speaking proto-nationality in the Baltics, this type of rhetoric differs slightly from anti-Baltic rhetoric in the sense that anti-Baltic rhetoric—quite ironically—calls upon Western international institutions to pressure "hypocritical" local authorities as members of the EU; however, pro-minority rhetoric seeks to engage these international institutions primarily to facilitate the political goals of the minority itself rather than simply criticizing the Baltic governments. Although there is of course a high correlation of concurrence between these two types of rhetoric, Russian media strategists realize the need to rally the Russian-speaking minority around its own flag in addition to the Russian one in order to be effective, especially given the already limited receptiveness of Baltic Russian speakers to Russian state narratives surrounding identity (Trimbach, 2015; Kallas, 2016).

Similarly, pro-minority rhetoric can include advocacy for the protection of the Russian-speaking minority more generally, which in this instance concerns education:

> Europe is home to more than 400 national minorities, and many groups are subject to government pressure. One of the most striking examples is Latvia, where the authorities recently adopted a new education law… "We are constantly trying to consolidate our fight for rights for the Russian-speaking population. Until now, the authorities have not heard us. Thanks to the petition and the appeal from the EC, there is a chance that the issue will be raised at the pan-European level," said the leader of the Association against Nazism in Latvia Janis Kuzine (Laru, 2018).

This excerpt contextualizes the struggle of Russian speakers in Latvia regarding educational reform to the broader struggle of national minorities all over Europe, a statement

which perhaps has the intent of striking a dissonant chord in the minds of those Baltic Russian speakers who remain optimistic about the EU and "European values" despite the discriminatory policies of their nationalizing states. At the same time, however, the hope expressed of bringing the situation to light at the pan-European level also implies a certain capacity of the EU to correct the issue, pitting Russian speakers and the EU together against the Baltic republics and thus legitimizing the idea of a politically autonomous Russian-speaking population and national identity. Furthermore, "constantly trying to consolidate our fight for the rights for the Russian-speaking population" implies that the current fight against educational reforms is only a part of a much more deep-seated and systematic national problem that is inherent to the identity construction of Russian speakers, and this problem is emphasized by the interviewee's title —"leader of the Association against Nazism in Latvia."

Pro-Russian Political Rhetoric

As in chapter two, the majority of pro-Russian political rhetoric surrounding the educational reforms in Latvia is centered around portraying the Russian government and politicians as benevolent or just as well as attempting to justify historical events from the perspective of the Russian government, i.e. the former Soviet Union. Regarding the former approach, a *Kommersant* article from 8 June 2018 expresses the sentiment that Putin is fair-minded and diplomatic even with regard to the persecution of his "compatriots" in Latvia, refusing the suggestion of retaliatory sanctions and emphasizing dialogue with Europe. He proceeds to highlight the supposed hypocrisy of the EU:

> During a direct line, Russian President Vladimir Putin was asked yesterday to respond to the problems faced by the Russian-speaking population in Latvia. The author of the question came up with the idea of "imposing some kind of sanctions against Latvia" because the authorities of the republic prohibit education in Russian. The president rejected this proposal, saying "unilaterally introducing any sanctions does not help solve problems, but only aggravates them"... According to him, Russia is conducting a dialogue with the European Union on these issues. "I hope that in the end they will be ashamed

> that, while paying attention to the violation of human rights outside the perimeters of the EU, they allow the rights of people living on the territory of the European Union to be grossly violated," said the Russian president (Chernenko, 2018).

Other than being a clear virtue signaling tactic regarding human rights—which Russia is in a poor position to criticize—Putin's statement is also incoherent with previous Russian policy, which had imposed retaliatory sanctions not only against Estonia in the wake of the Bronze Night but also against several countries in the wake of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, including a total ban on food imports from Australia, Canada, Norway, Japan, the United States, the EU and the United Kingdom (Barlow, 2014). The Russian Duma itself threatened Latvia with sanctions in response to the educational reforms, and in 2023 Russia would likewise impose sanctions on the Baltic states, sanctioning 144 citizens of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania for "lobbying for sanctions and other measures against Russia, interference in our internal affairs, and inciting Russophobic moods" in the wake of its 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Bergmane, 2020; News - the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian…, 2023). Perhaps more importantly, Putin is directing his attacks toward the EU itself in addition to the Baltic states, whereas anti-Baltic rhetoric concerning the same topic of educational reform mostly utilizes the EU for moral leverage in criticizing the "hypocritical" Baltic states. Thus, Russian media not only espouses factually misleading information but is also rhetorically inconsistent and often contradictory even when dealing with the same subject matter.

As was the case with Russian rhetoric surrounding the Bronze Night, Russian media regarding education reform in the Baltics also pursues a "Soviet apologetic" strategy of historical narrative construction, once again speaking in the language of "liberation" in reference to the occupation of the Baltic states by denying any sort of occupation:

> Recently, the attitude towards the Russian language and Russian culture has been perceived as a marker of the foreign policy orientation of post-Soviet states. Therefore, an attempt to narrow the scope of circulation of the Russian language or lower its status is

> perceived in the rest of the world as the intention of the country taking appropriate steps to move away from Russia and move closer to the EU and the USA. This is what the Baltic countries did a quarter of a century ago, still struggling with the language of the "occupiers"... In Latvia, President Raimonds Vējonis approved amendments to the language law, providing for the transfer of education in all secondary schools (including Russian) to the Latvian language by September 1, 2021 ("Kiev i Kishinev mogut dat'...", 2018).

Here language is explicitly associated with foreign policy ambitions, with the suppression of the Russian language and identity perceived as a marker of a broader political migration of post-Soviet states toward the West. This historical Russian identity is perceived as being seriously threatened by post-Soviet states who are "struggling" with the language of "occupiers," once again reflecting the identity conflict noted by Berg & Ehin (2016) in which Baltic and Russian post-Soviet national identity constructions and historical narratives are incompatible and antagonistic, and that this relationship has continued to freeze rather than thaw over time. Emphasis is put on the threat to the Russian language and culture in post-Soviet states in an attempt to mobilize the diaspora, which Russian soft power implies must fight for its survival in the face of a forced cultural extinction.

Conclusion

The educational reforms in Latvia—as well as in other Baltic and post-Soviet states—have undoubtedly reignited controversies surrounding civil rights, culture, and collective identity of Russian speakers in the post-Soviet sphere, an issue upon which Russian media has been quick to capitalize as part of a broader geopolitical agenda in its near abroad. Although there are several different themes present throughout the Russian media landscape surrounding these educational reforms, they all seem to suggest a broader interconnectedness of the Russian-speaking diaspora in an attempt to foster a sense of cultural identity or even some sort of proto-nationality that is distinct from both the "nationalizing" Baltic (and presumably other post-Soviet) states as well as the "ethnic homeland" of Russia. And this should come as no

surprise given the already limited reception of Russia's soft power among the Baltic Russian-speaking population, which has been primarily ineffective at advancing Russia's political goals. Russian public diplomacy officials are aware that Russia is not perceived as either morally or economically superior to the diaspora's nationalizing states—as evidenced by population of Narva—and instead primarily focus on encouraging localism and separatism among the diaspora as part of a larger "divide and conquer" strategy to weaken the political and cultural unity of post-Soviet states, all while portraying the Russian government as supportive of this separate cultural body.

To construct this distinct cultural identity, Russian media distributes factually misleading information, such as Putin's supposed opposition to sanctions, and manipulates its narrative depending on who or what is the primary subject of criticism at a particular time, such as its inconsistent portrayal of the EU as an encroaching Western threat in 2004 yet a morally astute polity that Baltic Russian speakers turned to in the face of "human rights abuses" in 2018. It also underscores the incompatible identities and historical narratives of Russia and the Baltic (and post-Soviet) states, emphasizing threats to the Russian language and culture in an attempt to mobilize the Russian-speaking diaspora out of fear of cultural extinction. By drawing attention away from itself and instead focusing on criticizing its enemies and encouraging separatism, Russian soft power is able to project some level of moral authority to its target audience despite the widespread unpopularity of Russia itself.

Conclusion: A Sketch of 21st Century Russian Soft Power and Identity Construction

In his monumental work *Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics*, Joseph Nye (2004b) describes soft power as "attractive power": "The ability to establish preferences tends to be associated with intangible assets such as an attractive personality, culture, political values and institutions, and policies that are seen as legitimate or having moral authority. If a leader represents values that others want to follow, it will cost less to lead." Russian foreign policy in the era of Putin seems to have embodied this axiom, using mass media as an instrument to project its moral and political legitimacy abroad, especially in its recently threatened sphere of influence. This paper has dissected the themes, strategy and structure of one small segment of the foreign policy behemoth that is the Kremlin's *miagkai sila* (soft power), focusing on Russian-language newspaper material surrounding three major historical events in relation to Russian speakers in the Baltic states. Although the events each have their own unique circumstantial peculiarities and span a period of over fourteen years, there are five notable consistencies (and one inconsistency) over time which warrant particular attention and may help paint a more concise picture of Russian soft power as a whole for policymakers and future scholars of this field. These trends all help point towards the conclusion that Russian soft power is attempting to incubate a separate collective identity construction among Baltic Russian speakers with the primary objective of challenging the dominant narratives of integration within their nationalizing states.

The first and most obvious trend apparent throughout coverage of all three events is the overwhelming amount of negative and antagonistic rhetoric targeted at a particular object of

interest, usually the Baltic governments and/or the EU and NATO. Russian media highlighted the potentially detrimental economic impacts of accession to the EU and spread fears of an encroaching and militaristic NATO. NATO, the EU, and the Baltic states were also presented as being uncooperative in international affairs, such as NATO's dismissal of Russian security concerns and Estonia's opposition to Nord Stream. More importantly, the Baltic states were painted as apartheid-esque regimes implementing draconian repression against the Russian-speaking population, and Russian media focused on the struggles and triumphs of the minority's fight for recognition. Russian rhetoric opposes not only national narratives of integration into Western international institutions but also assimilation into the domestic nation-state, building resentment against the "nationalizing state" among the Russian-speaking diaspora and breeding a unique form of nationalism centered around the local ethnic group.

In accordance with Nye's interpretation of soft power, Russian media also attempted to bestow a sense of moral and political authority to the Kremlin, mainly in the form of virtue signaling and strong appeals to emotion surrounding the legacy of World War II as well as shaming the Estonian and Latvian authorities for "blasphemy" and discrimination. Underscoring this moral and political authority is the presentation of incompatible identity constructions between Russians, Russian "compatriots" and the titular Baltic population, with Russian media employing the language of "liberation" when referencing the Soviet occupation, lamenting over a Soviet "nostalgia" and emphasizing a Baltic collective identity that is rooted in Russian history, language and culture. This moral authority can also be derived from the unfavorable portrayal of the EU, NATO, and the Baltic states in comparison to Russia with regard to international affairs as well as from highlighting the fight of Baltic Russian speakers against a perceived tyranny, further promoting a local-centric form of collective identity.

Perhaps most interestingly, Russian media was inconsistent in its portrayal of the EU and NATO over time, suggesting a broader narrative manipulation. Whereas in 2004 Russian media painted the EU and NATO as expansive Western blocs bound to disrupt the economies and security of their newly joined members, seemingly implying further discrimination against Russian speakers upon the Baltic states' entry into the EU and NATO, the opposite seemed to be true in 2007 and 2018, when the EU and NATO were presented as bastions of human rights which needed to reel the oppressive and hypocritical Baltic states back into the European values-based community. This "cherry-picking" strategy suggests that Russian soft power changes its objects of criticism based on their relevance to current foreign policy goals. It also points to the flexible nature of Russian soft power, which quite seamlessly dons the language of "European values" in order to critique the Baltic states despite fundamentally opposing the expansion of Western liberal values and institutions. Utilizing Western values in this manner further sows resentment among the Russian-speaking population against the Baltic states, which are now ironically not "European" enough.

Disinformation is widely known to be a major aspect of Russian media, and Russian media surrounding Baltic Russian speakers is of course no exception. There are numerous instances of intentional disinformation throughout the data, from the misquoting of Swedish economist Anders Aslund to the omission of key details regarding Estonia's objection to the Nord Stream pipeline to claims that a Russian-speaking protester was beaten to death by Estonian police. Such disinformation helped paint inaccurate pictures of the EU, NATO, and the Baltic states to Baltic Russian speakers with the intent of spurring opposition towards these entities and—in the case of the Bronze Night—creating general unrest. Additionally, fearmongering appears to be a notable part of Russia's soft power strategy during these timeframes and often works in tandem with disinformation, such as the notion that Russians will

be watched “with all eyes” by encroaching NATO spy planes despite a total of only four NATO fighter planes being stationed in the Baltic region until 2008. Emphasis is also placed on the threat to the Russian language and culture in post-Soviet states in an attempt to mobilize the diaspora, which Russian media implies must fight for its survival in the face of a forced cultural extinction, particularly in regard to Latvia’s educational reforms.

Two other trends are noteworthy throughout this aggregate dataset, the first of which being the relatively large absence of any discernible political bias, particularly concerning EU and NATO enlargement (29.63% of articles; 13.77% of codes). Although such a significant omission of political rhetoric could possibly suggest an intentional and systemic media strategy, the smaller presence of objective reporting and interviews of Baltic or other Western politicians concerning the Bronze Night and Latvia’s educational reforms (both of which hinder around 15% of articles and 5% of codes) does not support such a conclusion. To make generalizations about the relative proportions of objective to politically biased reporting within the Russian media landscape as a whole requires further research; however, the most likely reason for the relative lack of objective reporting concerning the Bronze Night and Latvia’s educational reforms has to do with the fact that these events directly involved the Russian-speaking minority (and by extension Russia, who considers them “compatriots”) whereas EU and NATO enlargement was not as controversial a development from the minority’s perspective. The sheer amount of political non-bias in this dataset does, however, challenge perceptions of Russian soft power in the literature of post-Soviet studies, which has the tendency to assume that all Russian media is an extension of Russian soft power when large amounts of such media are not necessarily related and in fact contradictory to Russian foreign policy goals. Perhaps my findings in some ways reinforce those of Szostek (2014), who argues that soft power is not a useful framework for explaining the diverse and complex Russian media presence in Ukraine and

emphasizes the pitfalls of soft power as a theoretical tool in relation to mass media. However, my findings differ significantly from Szostek (2014) in that the overwhelming majority of the data is biased in a clear and consistent manner, which I believe warrants a soft power interpretation in this instance.

The final observation regards the structure of the data itself: Russian media seems to employ a diverse set of rhetorical strategies in relation to just one event. From accusing the Baltic states of violating human rights to promoting the cause of the Russian-speaking minority to glorifying the moral stance of Russian politicians, there is seemingly no one consistently preferred type of discourse over time, and these rhetorics overlap and work together in most cases. Perhaps this speaks to the overarching complexity of Russian soft power, which criticizes its opponents from as many angles as possible.

Based on the above trends, I posit that Russian media as a mechanism of Russian soft power was (and is most likely still) attempting to construct a separate cultural, political, and linguistic identity among Russian speakers in the Baltic states that is separate from their nationalizing states but not necessarily loyal to Russia. This follows from the fact that the majority of Russian speakers in the Baltic states do not feel a significant cultural or political attachment to their "external homeland" Russia and are aware of the higher living standards in their nationalizing states, yet many still feel resentment towards their host countries as a result of perceived discrimination. This phenomenon is most acutely expressed in the majority Russian-speaking city of Narva, where the population practices a unique form of localism which is separate from both Estonian and Russian national identity constructions. Because Russian officials are aware of the relative unattractiveness of Russia among their target populations in the post-Soviet space, an increased emphasis is placed on adverse portrayals of Western countries and institutions and the Baltic states in tandem with portrayals of the Russian-speaking minority

as resilient in the face of discrimination. Although rhetoric highlighting positive aspects of Russia are prevalent, they are almost always in relation to a negative development surrounding the Baltic states or the broader West, usually Russia being cast as the "reasonable one" in relation to political dealings with NATO or Russian politicians being portrayed as morally astute in their scorning of the Estonian and Latvian authorities. This overwhelmingly negative and deflective property of Russian media concerning the Baltic states suggests that mechanisms of Russian soft power are attempting to draw attention away from Russia itself and instead focus on the flaws of other states and international organizations. My findings also point to the flexibility of Russian soft power, which practices narrative manipulation over time and even projects the values of its political opponents in order to reach a particular target audience. Disinformation and fearmongering help spread misconceptions and animosity among the Baltic Russian-speaking minority towards their host states, further lending to the creation of a separate cultural and political body which contradicts the dominant integration narratives of the Baltic nation-states.

Although existing research has shown that Russian soft power strategies have ultimately been met with limited receptiveness in the Baltic states, it is still important to analyze the body of data that comprises Russian soft power to gauge its strategies, themes and structure, which my findings demonstrate show particular consistencies over time within a rapidly changing political environment. Hopefully my findings can be extended to other contexts elsewhere in the post-Soviet space, particularly in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova which also have sizable Russian-speaking populations and experience conflicts of language, memory, and culture with regards to Russia. As Joseph Nye himself said: "In the information age, it's not just whose army wins, but whose story wins" (Nye, 2011, p. 19).

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Appendix: Codebook and Operational Definitions

Name	Description	Files	References
000 No Discernable Political Rhetoric		29	47
001 Matter-of-fact reporting	Plainly stating the events in a way in which I could not discern any bias. Most often like a newsreel.	18	18
002 interviews with or quoting Baltic politicians or other Western officials and analysts about their views	includes extensively quoting European/American news sources (in a way that doesn't just seem biased towards the Russian agenda). The questions themselves might be pointed, but usually most of the floor is given to the interviewee to explain their position, so I can't say it is necessarily "biased" with 100% certainty.	17	29
100 Anti-Baltic rhetoric	rhetoric aimed at portraying the titular populations of the baltic states (native Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians) or the titular governemnts in a negative light)	89	199
101 portraying baltic governments as non-diplomatic, aggressive, or as western puppets.	economically/politically inept/weak, or non-diplomatic, strain relations with Russia. Includes if they are puppets of West or reliant on West for military support.	25	30
102 portraying Baltic government or populations as repressive against ethnic Russians or biased against Russia and Russian media	This most often comes in the form of accusing the Baltic governments of discrimination of ethnic Russian or stating that there are human rights violations happening there, etc. Also includes descriptions of police actions which imply that they are overly retaliatory towards Russians.	54	60
103 Baltic governments do not reflect values of EU, or the legailty of their laws is questioned	The EU and Council of Europe espouses protections for minority rights, Russia calls out the baltic states for not meeting these standards, etc.	18	18
104 Baltic governments are disrespectful to memories of WWII	Usually in the form of removing monuments which is condemned by the Russian media.	22	24
105 baltic governments are economically, militarily weak, corrupt, reliant on Russia, etc.	Includes rhetoric attempting to frame the Baltic states as unable to adequately provide for their citizens, as corrupt, and as econmoically dependent on Russia. "Latvians are leaving Lativa"	3	4
106 portraying popular resistance to relocating the Bronze soldier	Mainly concernign the relocation of the bronze soldier. Different from popular resistance to Western integration bc this popular resentment against the individual Baltic countries, not mulitnational organizations like NATO.	13	14

Name	Description	Files	References
107 Baltic governments or population support or are fascist, or are otherwise too nationalistic		15	16
108 Other European countries, politicians (including US and UN) do not support actions of Baltic governments	Particulalry with regard to estonia and bronze soldier (collective memory surrounding WWII)	9	9
109 Russian government, businesses and citizens condemning actions of Baltic governments	includes inititating trade war as retaliation, Russians in Russia boycotting Estonian goods or if an author is even criticizing the Russian government for not punishing the Baltic states enough	5	5
110 portraying popular resistance to de-russification		15	16
111 emphasizing negative consequences of ''discrimination'' for relations with Russia or European security		1	1
112 de-russification is economically detrimental		2	2
200 Pro-minority rhetoric	Rhetoric aimed at portraying the Russian-speaking minority in a positive light in comparison to the native population or advocating for minority rights	29	38
201 portraying Russian protestors or pro-Russian movements as justified in their actions	Ex. claiming protestors on Bronze night were "peaceful", implying that the Russians who blockaded the Estonian embassy in Moscow were defending the memory of WWII, etc.	22	22
202 emphasis on education in the minority Russian language		7	7
203 Advocating or focusing on election of Russian-speaking officials		1	1

Name	Description	Files	References
204 Advocating for protection of Russian minority	Different from 102 because it's not just calling out the discrimination but calling for an end to it. Good example was the article about the "Russian political party" of the EU.	7	8
300 Anti-Western political or economic rhetoric	Rhetoric aimed at portraying Western political and economic institutions or countries in a negative or threatning light.	50	95
301 invasion rhetoric	implies an invasion or sense of impending threat or economic/political domination from the West, including the US, NATO and EU. Ex. "NATO jets are flying over us, only 100km from Moscow", usually fear-mongering type of rhetoric.	17	18
302 Red Herring	focusing on a trivial or non-relevant issue in order to distract. Ex. NATO jets preventing people from sleeping, etc.	0	0
303 portraying popular resistance to Western integration	Giving stats and emphasizing how popular votes to join the EU only won by a marginal percentage, or anything suggesting that many people in the Baltic states are not in favor of joining NATO or the EU.	7	8
304 highlighting economic disadvantages of integration	For this code I will include not only economic disadvantages to the Baltic states and to the average Baltic citizen, but also to Russia itself. This is because much of this kind of rhetoric is about the economic damage to Russia, and I think it is safe to presume that if a Baltic Russian is reading Russian news and hears how integration will negatively impact the Russian econonmy, he/she will likely assume that this will have a negative impact on themselves given that Russia is such a close trading	22	22
305 emphasizing negative consequences of NATO expansion for European security or relations with Russia	"Russia will take defensive measures/act in self defense.." "Expansion will worsen relations with Russia and make the European security landscape more volatile" etc.	7	7
306 NATO, EU or US is aggressive, undiplomatic, against the interests of Russia, unreliable, etc.	"NATO is an aggressive military bloc" etc. I use this code anytime Russian media portrays a Western country or politician as being unreasonable or antagonistic.	21	21
307 EU or NATO integration leads to identity loss and or subjugation	"The EU is the new imperialism and has put Latvia under its control" "Brussels will be making all of the security decisions"	6	6

Name	Description	Files	References
308 Country is not prepared economically politically militarily to join the EU or NATO	"Latvia's government is very corrupt, is it politically prepared to join the EU?"	1	1
309 Ascention to EU or NATO will increase crime		1	1
310 NATO or EU is incompetent or weak, ineffecient, ineffective		1	1
311 EU isn't doing enough to counter discrimination in Baltic states		4	4
312 Russophobia, anti-Russian hysteria and double standards against Russia and Russian language	"Russia will be labeled as an aggressor for defending the human rights of Russian speakers in Latvia" etc.	5	6
400 Pro-Russian political rhetoric	Rhetoric aimed at portraying the Russian government or society in a positive or benevolent light, often in comparison to the West.	48	57
401 Compatriot rhetoric	Labels or implies that ethnic Russians living in the Baltic states and elsewhere are Russian "compatriots" or otherwise have cultural/political connections and loyalties ot the Russian state.	4	4
402 portraying Russian government and politicians as belevolent or just, or defending them from wrongdoing or denying allegations	"It wasn't the Kremlin who launched the cyber attacks on Estonia" "Russian politicians laid wreaths on the tomb of the liberator soldier and helped return the exhumed ashes to the families" "Russia tried everything it could to negotiate, but NATO still wouldn't come to the bargaining table."	34	35
403 Soviet apologetic -- trying to present history from the Russian government's perspective and or justifying historical events.	Ex. "The last time Austria, Sweden and Finland joined in 1995, there were no particular problems with the protocol. This time Moscow showed diplomatic activity. It's not easy to just take and release former fellow prisoners to the West." — Novaia gazeta 4/29/2004 Look at Rossiskaya Gazeta 06-28-2007 for really good example	16	16
404 Russian government as protectors against West (includes allies of Russia such as Belarus)	Basically an extention of 301 but with an added "Russia has been preparing for the expansion by increasing military presence on border along with its ally Belarus, etc."	2	2

Name	Description	Files	References
500 Portraying the Baltic governments or Western institutions and countries in a postive manner		7	7
501 emphasizing the need for joint cooperation with Western institutions such as EU and NATO	Almost non-existant, but there is one article that seemed to be a rogue which called for cooperation with NATO to combat terrorism.	1	1
502 portraying EU as beneficial		1	1
503 portarying NATO as beneficial		0	0
504 emphasizing improvements in relations between Russian and EU or NATO	ex. highlighting success of trade deals, agreements, etc. optimistic mood	2	2
505 Russians need to or should learn local language		3	3
600 Portraying the Russian government or politicians in a negative manner		5	6
601 political and economic suport from Moscow is not useful for Baltic Russians		3	3
602 portraying Russia as poor or economically unfit		1	1
603 Russian government is intentionally sowing discord, is agressive, undiplomatic, etc.		1	1
604 Russian government is repressive against the Baltic states or its own people		1	1