

## **‘TOOLS OF DESTABILIZATION’: KREMLIN’S MEDIA OFFENSIVE IN LITHUANIA<sup>1</sup>**

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Just a few years ago Lithuania marked 20 years since the withdrawal of the Soviet army from its territory. On this occasion President Dalia Grybauskaitė stated that ‘speaking with one voice, Lithuania secured a historic victory without using arms. [...] This event is a history lesson on how much countries achieve when during a critical moment their citizens are united by principles one cannot violate, sell and betray’ (the Lithuanian Tribune 2013). This statement symbolises the fascination of the President with the political unity of that time and the non-military path towards Lithuanian independence, but on the other hand it illustrates the anxiety towards the lack of similar political mobilization in contemporary Lithuanian politics, and this true of Ukrainian, Moldavian or Georgian politics as well. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin has lost direct political and military control of the region, but it started mastering the tools of non-military influence by exploiting the lingering weakness of post-Soviet societies: growing internal political splits, social and economic discontent, ethnic minorities, and prevailing energy and media dependencies. This new kind of Kremlin strategy paved the path for the Russian campaign in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. Even before that, the new Russian strategy of ‘soft pressure’ became especially evident in the second half of 2013 when Lithuania took up the Presidency of the EU Council.

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The realisation of the importance of a non-military strategy in the Baltics for Russia was building-up gradually. Already in 1992 the *Diplomaticeskii Vestnik* (magazine of the Russian MFA) presented the so called ‘Karaganov doctrine’: Sergey Karaganov – an expert and long-time chairman of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy (SVOP) – in one of the articles of that magazine encouraged the use of Russian compatriots for foreign policy purposes in the so called ‘near abroad’ region (Karaganov 1992). This doctrine was based on pure interest of keeping Russian influence in the Baltics. It had to be done by hindering the integration of ethnic minorities in the Baltics and by facilitating the stay of Russian-speakers in the ‘near abroad’ with the hope of using them as a tool for implementing Russia’s interests. The concepts of the ‘compatriot policy’ and the ‘near abroad’ became the driving force behind Russian foreign policy in the Baltics.

When Vladimir Putin came to power, he started concentrating on the so called ‘humanitarian dimension’ of Russian foreign policy in the region. The idea was based on the principle of controlling the post-Soviet region by non-military, but quite aggressive tools: shady investments, energy blackmail and media manipulation (Pelnens 2009). In 2008 the outline of such a policy was included in *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* (*The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2008*) and in 2013 the new FP Concept elaborated that Russia sees its goals in:

protecting rights and legitimate interests of compatriots living abroad; [...] supporting consolidation of organisations of compatriots to enable them to effectively uphold their rights in the countries of residence while preserving the cultural and ethnic identity of the Russian diaspora and its ties with the historical homeland; [...] facilitating the learning and wider use of the Russian language; [...] strongly counteracting manifestations of extremism, neo-Nazism, any forms of racial discrimination, aggressive nationalism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia, as well as attempts to rewrite history using it to build confrontation and provoke revanchism in global politics and to revise the outcomes of World War II [...] (*The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2008*).

The important aspect of the new FP concept is that it additionally emphasises the use of soft power.

Such Russian foreign policy developments affected the political and security thinking of targeted countries as well. The National Security Strategy of Lithuania in 2012 specified external risks, dangers and threats which must be given particular attention and amongst them – in priority order: economic and energy dependence – dominance of the economic entities of other states in the economic sectors of strategic importance for national security (energy, transport, finances, and crediting); development of nuclear energy in the region disregarding international nuclear energy safety standards; efforts to exert an impact on the political system, military capabilities, social and economic life, cultural identity of the Republic of Lithuania; information attacks – actions of state and non-state entities in the international and national information space aimed at spreading biased and misleading information, shaping a negative public opinion in respect of interests of national security of the Republic of Lithuania; cyber attacks and other more conventional risks (The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2008).

Recently the Lithuanian intelligence institutions (State Security Department and Second Investigation Department under the Ministry of Defence) started releasing yearly public reviews. In the 2012 review, the Lithuanian State Security Department specifically stated that some countries – having Russia in mind – are using not just traditional power means to promote their national interests. Lithuanian security risks include ‘the control of economic and energy resources, the creation and support of influence groups in Lithuania, [...] active informational, ideological policy and “history rewriting”, [...] fostering ethnic and political discord, weakening the integration of ethnic minorities in Lithuanian society, promoting distrust in the democratic political system of Lithuania, supporting specific political forces in the country’ (State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania 2013). The review specifically warned that all those aggressive means of non-military pressure would intensify during the Lithuanian Presidency in the EU Council. It is by no surprise that faced by such a complex Russian non-military pressure, the Baltic States are gradually establishing NATO

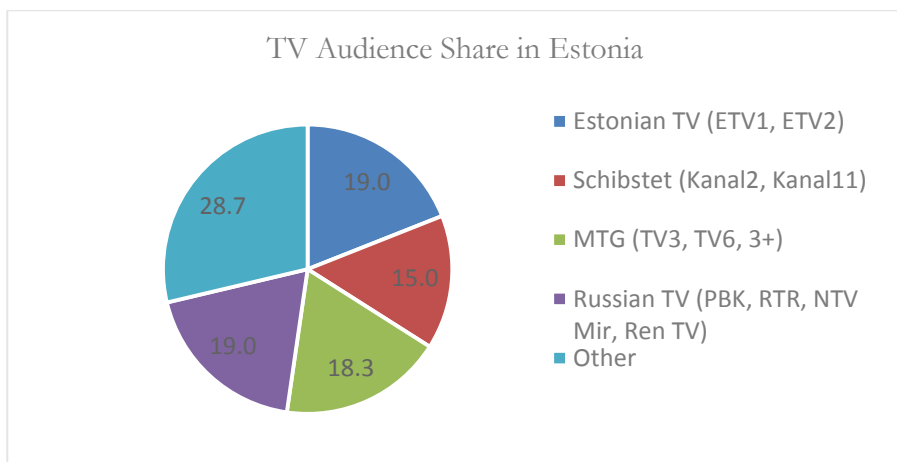
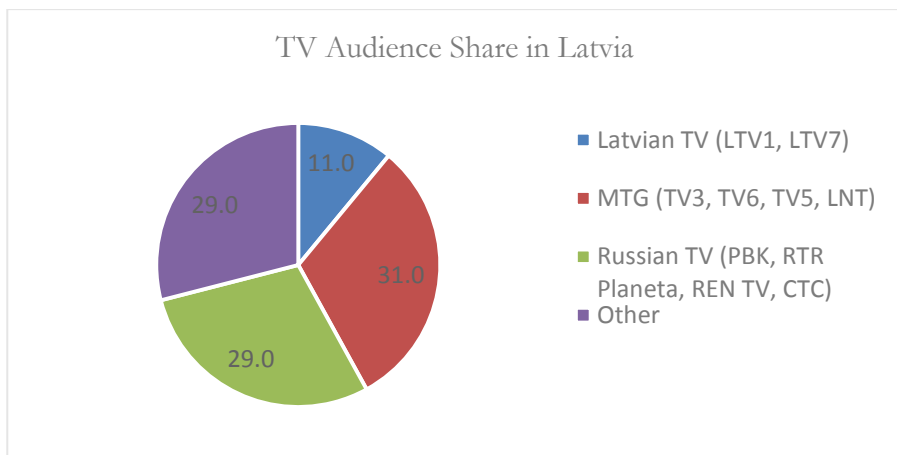
centres of excellence in areas where the respective governments perceive security risks to be the most serious: in 2008 a NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence was set up in Tallinn, Estonia, in 2013 a NATO Energy Security Centre of Excellence was established in Vilnius, Lithuania, and NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga, Latvia, in 2014.

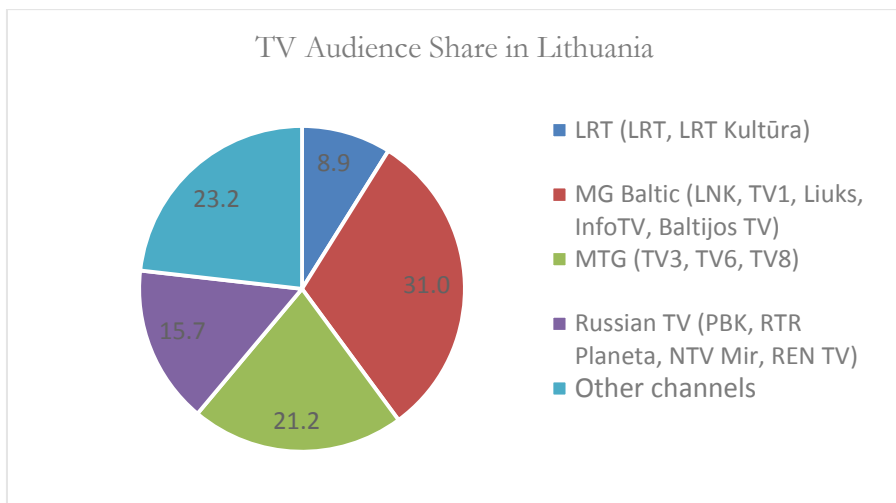
However, it was only after Kremlin's campaign in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine - and the aggressive anti-Western propaganda offensive that followed it - that the West realised what big security gaps it left out for Putin to exploit. In this respect Lithuania's experience with Russian media presence and activities in its information space should be a valuable 'lesson learned' for Western political leaders and experts.

The popularity of the Russian language, positive attitude towards Russian culture and symbols, widespread nostalgia for the Soviet past creates a very favourable environment for the Russian media and its propaganda narratives in Lithuania.<sup>2</sup> The State Security Department numerous times warned about potential aggressive information attacks which might be orchestrated from specific internet news portals (Rubaltic.ru or Regnum.ru). However, it is not individual Russian internet portals that are the biggest concern for Lithuania, it is the traditional media environment – specifically the TV environment – that is overflowing with Russian media production (Russian TV channels in Lithuanian cable networks and Russian made TV production in Lithuanian TV channels). Media expert Kęstutis Petrauskis conducted research into the TV audiences of the Baltic States in 2013 which shows the audience shares of alternative TV channels (more than 23%) and Russian TV channels (almost 16 %):

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<sup>2</sup> see Ramonaitė, A., Maliukevičius N., Degutis, M. 2007. *Tarp Rytų ir Vakarų: Lietuvos visuomenės geokultūrinės nuostatos*. Vilnius: Versus aureus.





**Source:** Petrauskis 2013

This can be compared to the situation in Latvia and Estonia where the audience share of Russian TV channels is even higher: 29% and 19% respectively. The Lithuanian media environment is different from the other Baltic States in yet another respect: e.g. one of the major TV owners in Lithuania is a local and not western business group – MG Baltic, which owns one of the most popular channels LNK.

It is not just a matter of Russian TV channels taking a share of the audience in the Lithuanian information environment. Russian media production comprises a considerable portion of TV production in major Lithuanian TV channels: e.g. LNK and TV3. When their revenue dropped significantly after the 2008 crisis, they started increasing the share of Russian production in their programming because of lower prices for Russian TV entertainment programs. In the end, the Russian media has become a major player in the Lithuanian media market. A large proportion of the population receive not just entertainment, but also news about the world and the post-Soviet region through the Russian media.

The current Russian policy in Lithuania – as well as in the other Baltic States – has a clear competitive advantage in the media environment. The important question is – what messages are transmitted and reinforced through these communication channels? The Kremlin’s media strategy focuses mainly on the topics of history: distant as well as more recent. Lithuania is portrayed as a state that is based on aggressive nationalistic values, fascist past and present. The Soviet period, on the contrary, is shown as something glorious and nostalgic. Those information campaigns are usually orchestrated before or during memorable national anniversaries or electoral cycles in Lithuania. History dominates even in the soft Russian entertainment production: fiction films and TV series of suspense and drama during WWII or Soviet Union times get prime time on some Lithuanian TV channels. The messages about historical interpretations beneficial for Putin’s regime are later echoed during compatriots’ events, seminars and conferences; they are repeated in the compatriots’ media. In 2012 Lithuania witnessed one more organisational format for discussions about history and politics – Format-A<sup>3</sup> – that was implemented in Lithuania by Russian journalist working in Estonia Galina Sapozhnikova (Vedler 2012). This so-called ‘discussion club’ nowadays specialises in inviting scandalous Russian experts that speak about the collapse and crisis of the EU, NATO and the West in general to Lithuanian audiences.

When in the autumn of 2013 the Russian TV channel ‘Pervij Kanal’ ran yet another pseudo-documentary ‘Chelovek I zakon’ about most recent Lithuanian history – the bloody events of January 1991 in Vilnius – and muddled the facts, a significant event happened, which could be interpreted as a serious shift in the Lithuanian media business community when dealing with the Russian media attacks in the Lithuanian information environment. This specific pseudo-documentary concentrated on the conspiracy theory, which is propagated by the marginal Lithuanian politician Algirdas Paleckis, that during the January events in Vilnius it was the activists of the Lithuanian independence movement Sąjūdis and not the OMON soldiers who started shooting at the crowd and the Soviet military. The film created a wave of fury in

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<sup>3</sup> see <<http://www.format-a3.ru>>

Lithuanian society, but it was local media companies and not the regulatory institutions that reacted the first: the TV cable network company 'Cgates' suspended PBK transmission via its network and some advertisers stated that they are suspending marketing campaigns in this channel. We can conclude that the aggressive tactics of the Russian media backfired, and the Lithuanian media companies started to view Russian media production as a serious risk to their business reputation.

### **In conclusion**

In recent years Soft Power has become a trendy term in Russian political and academic discourse: President Putin writes about it in his pre-election article in the Moscow News (Putin 2012), the new head of Rossotrudnichestvo Konstantin Kosachev, declares it to be his priority for action in the new post (Kosachev 2012). However, the concept of soft power in the hands of Kremlin officials and politechnologists was transformed to suit chauvinistic Russian political realities. The competitive advantage that Russia has in the media environment of the post-Soviet region is used not so much for making Russian image better as to fight historical and political battles, or even to pave way for aggressive intervention into the neighbours' territory, as Ukraine's example shows. This new power strategy is based on the traditional idea of 'divide and conquer' – in Lithuania it centres on deepening splits between the majority and Polish minority, in other societies it centres on the idea of protecting 'the Russian speakers' from mythical Neo-Nazis or 'Western puppeteers'. In the end the contemporary Russian regime is still a master in hard power tactics, just that it employs creative media tools to exert it, and Lithuania had a very early experience with such kind of power methods.



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