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Lithuania at the Gunpoint of Russian Propaganda

Medial space has for years been exploited by the authorities of Russia to present propaganda content. As a former USSR republic, and presently a part of NATO and EU, Lithuania is treated as one of the targets of the attacks of propaganda.

In the monography issued by the Lithuanian Eastern Europe Studies Centre (Rytų Europos studijų centras, RESC), entitled „Russian propaganda: analysis, evaluation and recommendations” (Lit.: „Rusijos propaganda: analizė, įvertinimas ir rekomendacijos”), five basic stereotypes have been indicated, used by Russian propaganda in relation to Lithuania: 1. Lithuania is an economically and socially backward country, tormented by mass emigration; 2. Lithuania is a neo-fascist country; 3. Lithuania is a non-self-sufficient country, dependent on EU and/or USA structures; 4. Lithuania is a country which does not respect the rights of national minorities; 5. Russia is a defender of traditional and conservatist values. The presence of those stereotypes is made clear by the analysis below, done between 28th of August and 3rd of September on the basis of the monitoring of several Russian propaganda channels having to do with Lithuania: the portals rubaltic.ru, Sputnik Lietuva as well as the informational programme „Litovskoye Vremia” (Rus.: „Литовское Время”; „Lithuanian Time”), broadcast in Russian language television Pervyi Baltiskii Kanal (PBK; a mutation of channel 1 of Russian television on the Baltic countries). Each of those media plays a different role in media space and runs its own informational politics.

„Litovskoye Vremia” („Lithuanian Time”)/ Pervyi Baltiskii Kanal – an everyday (from Monday to Friday) information channel, since 2004 broadcast from Latvia, part of the PBK schedule since 2004 (the PBK runs analogous programmes in Latvia and Estonia).

„Litovskoye Vremia” („Lithuanian Time”) in comparison with Rubaltic.ru and Sputnik Lietuva is, with regard to the intensity of propaganda, the most gentle one. Certainly this is in connection with the fact that the company is registered within EU territory and Lithuanian authorities have statutory tools of influencing its informational politics. For example, with the decision from 2013, Vilnius Provincial Administrative Court for three months stopped the transmission of the PBK on Lithuanian territory due to it broadcasting disinformation and falsifying historical facts. In the report of the Lithuanian State Security Department from 2014, the PBK was mentioned as one of the tools for Russian influence in Lithuania. In 2016, PBK TV themselves stopped the production of „Litovskoye Vremia” for several months, justifying it by „unfavourable politics” of the Lithuanian state (<http://ru.delfi.lt/news/live/pbk-priostanavlivaet-proizvodstvo-programmy-litovskoe-vremya.d?id=69725108>). Later the activity of the program was renewed, but the publishers try to act within the frames of Lithuanian law.

„Litovskoye Vremia” positions itself as an impartial informational program. This can be seen on the example of the information given, which concerns first of all the events of the day in Lithuania. In this respect, as well as calm narration of the person running the program, it is not that much different from Lithuanian media.

The target group of the program is first of all the Russian speaking (or knowing Russian) part of the inhabitants of Lithuania, having some sentiment towards Russia or towards the times of the USSR,

that's why many subjects in the monitored week differed from general Lithuanian subjects. In this time, the cycle of reportages „Vilnius 100 years ago”(Rus.: „Вильнюс 100 лет назад”) was published. The subjects were generally neutral, although one of the series chronologically diverged from the time defined in the title of the cycle, it concerned the film Vilnius from the Soviet period (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aqm-y5MWhAM>, 1.09.2017).

The news also touched upon some marginal issues, skipped by general Lithuanian media. On the 28th of August, a large reportage was emitted about the so called starving action in front of the Presidential Palace in Vilnius, run under the slogan of the protest against injustice in Lithuanian courts (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqGs74jhqf4>). Its initiators were two little known non-government organizations: the Association for Human Rights as well as the Council of Lithuanian Citizens, also a member of pro-Kremlin Lithuanian party Social Folk Front, Giedrius Grabauskas, took part in it. The action, in spite of its name, was not really a starving protest and did not stir much echo in the Lithuanian media (Lithuanian analysts point to the fact that „by a strange coincidence” it coincided with the preparations for Russian-Belarussian military trainings Zapad 2017). Apart from the PBK, it was described by Sputnik Lietuva (<http://sputniknews.lt/society/20170828/3765528/bado-streikas-prie-prezidento-rumu-tesiasi.html>, 28.08.2017) as well as rubaltic.ru, which entitled its text „Lithuanian defenders of human rights: in our country the authorities kill people” (Russ.: „Литовские правозащитники: в нашей стране власти убивают людей”, in: <http://www.rubaltic.ru/article/politika-i-obshchestvo/31082017-litovskie-pravozashchitniki-v-nashey-strane-vlasti-ubivayut-lyudey/>, 31.08.2017).

One of „Litovskoye vremia” reportages was devoted to Soviet sculptures removed from the Green Bridge (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OY5eGyTcMDE>, 30.08.2017). For many years there has been a discussion in Lithuania, whether the sculptures symbolizing a labourer, a kolkhoz worker, a working woman and a Red Army soldier, put there in the fifties of the 20th C can stand in the centre of independent Lithuania. The Embassy of the Russian Federation in Vilnius spoke in their defence. After that, when in 2015 the sculptures, by the decision of the self-government of the City of Vilnius, were removed due to their „bad state and the threat they posed for the passers by”, the subject practically vanished from Lithuania's medial space.

Negative attitude to the presented event could be felt in the reportages of the celebration of the opening in Lithuania a transmitter of Svoboda Radio (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SHOKc_AA0c, 30.08.2017) or about the legislative initiative of the group of Parliament members whose purpose is to delimit the number of Russian speaking channels and films in Lithuanian TV stations (according to the project, the Russian speaking production should have obligatory dubbing in Lithuanian TV stations, whereas Western production should be emitted with subtitles) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4kVabvaqwg>, 30.08.2017). It is worth emphasising that in both cases the subject was sketched without breaking the rules of broadly understood journalist' objectivism.

Sputnik Lietuva (www.sputniknews.lt) – a part of the Russian informational agency Sputnik, of international range, whose owner is the government of the Russian Federation. Run in Russian and Lithuanian (since 2016) language versions. In the report of the State Security Department from 2017, this portal is named as one of the elements of Russian propaganda in Lithuania.

Sputnik positions itself as an information agency, thus a large part of the content it publishes is neutral material. Propaganda articles are usually accompanied by author's commentary or statements by experts from various pro-Kremlin institutions. The article „First in the ranking,

or Glamour and Poverty in Vilnius” (lit.: „Pirmasis reitinge, arba Spindesys ir skurdas Vilniuje”) was devoted to the fact that in one of international rankings Vilnius got onto the list of the 10 richest cities of Middle and Eastern Europe. The author of the text, Vladimir Matveev, focused, however, on describing the low life standard in Lithuania and unfair EU directives. „That is why the precedence of Lithuanian capital in the ranking of Middle and Eastern Europe’s richest cities is not a joyful piece of news, but a sad one” – stated Matveev (<http://sputniknews.lt/columnists/20170829/3774935/pirmasis-reitinge-arba-spindesys-ir-skurdas-vilniuje.html>, 29.08.2017).

Also the information about Radio Svoboda programmes from the territory of Lithuania was presented in a negative way. The information was commented by the head of the Council of the expert foundation „Laboratory of Euroasian Ideas” (Rus.: Мастерская евразийских идей) Grigoriy Trofimchuk, in whose opinion the project is bound to fail, because „for 25 years people got to know what Western democracy is and they can compare it with the past times”. „Lithuania is trying to earn some money, it seeks its place in anti-Russian activity, offers its services, in this case – territory to put the equipment in” – the expert opined (<http://ru.sputniknews.lt/radio/20170829/3773827/ehkspert-o-translyacijah-radio-svoboda.html>, 29.08.2017).

The article „How Went the Trainings Zapad 2013” (Lit.: „Kaip vyko pratybos »Zapad 2013«”) published in the context of the oncoming Zapad 2017 manoeuvres was written in a way which emphasised the groundlessness of Lithuania’s and the West’s worries caused by the imminent Russian-Belorussian military trainings. Remembering the manoeuvres Zapad 2013, the author reminded „The trainings finished according to the plan, the soldiers and military cars came back to their units. After the end of »Zapad 2013«, the general secretary Anders Rasmussen thanked Russia for inviting the observers” (<http://sputniknews.lt/photo/20170903/3802915/kaip-vyko-pratybos-zapad-2013.html> – 03.09.2017).

Also in a reassuring tone a felieton of the well-known Russian journalist, Vladimir Mamontov, was written (Владимир Мамонтов), concerning the scandal connected with a group of Lithuanian children on a summer camp in Russia, where they met the representatives of the Russian motorcycle club „the Night Wolves”. The members of the club are connected with Kremlin administration and they were active during the Kremlin’s annexation in 2014. Mamontov negates the danger coming from this type of contact. The meeting with the „Night Wolves” he described as an important stage in the children’s development, comparing it to reading Jack London’s adventure novels. (<http://ru.sputniknews.lt/columnists/20170901/3792211/skandal-s-poezdskoj-shkolnikov-v-rossiyu.html> – 01.09.2017).

Whereas the article „The Lithuanian Fleet is Dying – Brussels Shall Not Help” (lit.: „Lietuvos laivynas žūva — Briuselis nepadės”) describes losses which the Lithuanian fishers have incurred after Lithuania joined EU. „Lithuanian fishing industry shall still suffer losses, because in the EU it is always the stronger party who wins” – warns Sputnik Lietuva (<http://sputniknews.lt/columnists/20170903/3815636/lietuvos-zuvininkystes-problemas-analizuojame-ekspertas.html>, 03.09.2017).

One of the directions of the Russian propaganda is attacking people *ad personam*, overstating some of their features or influences. One of such persons is the father of Lithuanian independence, the honorary head of Lithuanian conservatists, Vytautas Landsbergis, who for years has been taking hard anti-Kremlin stance. In the article „Back to the Future: Shall Vytautas Landsbergis Become the

President of Lithuania”, the author describes real efforts of the conservatists to give presidential status to Vytautas Landsbergis. At the same time, the article contains a lot of lies and plot theories. „Together with Dalia Grybauskaitė coming to the presidential palace, the polls on the subject of »love of the nation« have been less and less frequently conducted. In the last one, from 2010, done by the weekly »Veidas«, Landsbergis’ name was absent. From that time on, the conservatist fraction of the Parliament, each year have tried to force the project aimed at giving presidential plenipotency to their spiritual leader” – writes Vladimir Matveyev (<http://ru.sputniknews.lt/columnists/20170828/3762397/stanet-li-landsbergis-prezidentom-litvy.html>, 28.08.2017). This is not true, after 2010 such researches into public opinion have been run regularly, and invariably Vytautas Landsbergis was present in them.

Rubaltic.ru was started in January 2013. It positions itself as an analytic-informational portal devoted to the issues of the Baltic Sea Region, as well as Ukraine, Belarus and Moldavia. The basic direction of its activity are the Baltic states. As compared to „Litovskoye Vremia” and Sputnik Lietuva, it takes the most aggressive stance towards Lithuania. Its tactics can be compared to internet trolling consisting in purposeful ridiculing and insulting the adversary through serving controversial, often untrue information or opinion. For this purpose, rubaltic.ru uses social services, e.g. Facebook, where it places insulting and ridiculing mems. Rubaltic.ru is characterised by emotional language, magnified or twisted facts, tendentious choice of facts and interlocutors.

The contents put in the portal are mainly analyses, journalism, interviews and reportages, that is, genres which by definition assume subjective approach. This allows the editor to rebuke in advance any criticism concerning journalist’s objectivism. Anyway, the founders of the portal are not hiding their subjective and negative attitude towards the Baltic states. „Special attention focused on Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia is not accidental. The international situation has gone off the state of equilibrium of the last decades. The world is hesitating between scenarios of building new global security system, and the confrontation of the blocs. In this context, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are some of the most active lobbyists of the second scenario. Such activity of the Baltic republics also corresponds to their inner processes: the growth of authoritarian tendencies, worsening of economic situation, social degradation” - the authors of rubaltic.ru write in the description of the project (<http://www.rubaltic.ru/about/>).

One of the directions of rubaltic.ru activity consists in showing the alleged differences and conflicts between the Baltic states or between the Baltic states (new Europe) and the other EU countries (old Europe), new member countries are portrayed as clients of the USA.

The contention of Lithuania and Estonia concerning the synchronization of electricity networks has been presented as a conflict between two Baltic states around EU funds. In the article „Energetic independency from Russia divides the Baltic states” (ros.: „Энергетическая независимость от России разъединяет Прибалтику”) one can read: „Vilnius under the cover of the »threat« coming from its eastern neighbour, successfully lobbys European Commission financing various unprofitable megaprojects. By the way, Tallin also strives for European financing of their own energetic agenda” (<http://www.rubaltic.ru/article/ekonomika-i-biznes/28082017-energeticheskaya-nezavisimost-ot-rossii-razedinyaet-pribaltiku/> 28.08.2017).

Among economic issues, there comes up the issue of the construction of Nord Stream II. In the article „Russia and EU develop »North Stream« against American sanctions” („Россия и ЕС развивают »Северный поток« вопреки американским санкциям”) the author writes that in spite of USA attempts at stopping the construction of the pipeline, Russia continues the project together

with the EU. „After the fall of the USRR and the Warsaw Pact, the possibility for USA to exert pressure on its European allies have grown considerably, at the cost of joining to the American sphere of influence almost all of the Middle and Eastern Europe. The American clientele in the last decade has done all it could in order to destroy the common energetic space of Russia and the EU. Accepting the III energy package, the fight with the German-Russian gas pipeline Nord Stream, which in patriotic ardour was called a Ribbentrop-Molotov pact – these are the effect of the activity of the defenders of American interest from Eastern Europe countries”. (<http://www.rubaltic.ru/article/ekonomika-i-biznes/31082017-rossiya-i-es-razvivayut-severnnyy-potok-vopreki-amerikanskim-sanktsiyam/>, 31.08.2017).

The Eastern Partnership has been criticised yet another time. „It is worth remembering that in spite of the enlightened guarantees of the European politicians about the project aiming exclusively at strengthening the good neighbourly relations, it has a deeper meaning – drawing the countries of Eastern Europe and Transcaucasia, historically strictly bound with Russia, into the sphere of Western influence” – we can read in the article „Lithuania has shrugged the responsibility for hopeless foreign politics from EU to Russia” (Рус.: „Литва переложила вину за провальную внешнюю политику ЕС на Россию”) (<http://www.rubaltic.ru/article/politika-i-obshchestvo/29082017-litva-perelozhila-vinu-za-provalnuyu-vneshnyuyu-politiku-es-na-rossiyu/>, 29.08.2017).

Expressing criticism towards the idea of transmitting Radio Svoboda programmes from Lithuania and their placing a transmitter on Lithuanian territory, the portal published an interview with a so-called authority on the subject, the journalist Andrey Babitsky, who previously was an RS employee and presently works for separatist media in Ukraine, about which the editor has not informed the readers. „To me RS is an atavism, a relict of the cold war, which presently in its instrumental aspect does not seem anything precious. I think that all these are nonsensical steps and that the victory over the »Russian party« most likely shall not be won by the use of this tool” – declared Babitsky (<http://www.rubaltic.ru/article/politika-i-obshchestvo/30082017-andrey-babitskiy-rossiyskim-telekanalam-nado-brat-primer-s-putina/>, 30.08.2017).

In nowadays very numerous historical texts, the main emphasis is put on seeking for points of contention between particular countries (including those based on stereotypes). The article „Shall Lithuania Bill Poland for the Occupation of the Vilnius Region?” („Литва выставит Польше счет за оккупацию Виленского края?”) is devoted to German reparations to Poland for the Second World War. The author claims that Poland can also demand reparations from Lithuania for the lost Eastern borderlands and suggests that Lithuania can also demand reparations from Poland for the „occupation of the Vilnius land”. „For 20 years of the Polish aggression towards Lithuania, Warsaw has been actively realizing the politics of retrieving historical justice towards the local Poles through taking land away from Lithuanian people and giving greater rights to the Polish people. The politics of „removing” Lithuanians resulted in hundreds thousands of compulsory refugees who have been deprived of homeland and of their property. In 1939, USRR redressed historical justice by giving the Lithuanian capital won from the Poles to Lithuania. Now the Lithuanian authorities have full right to demand from Poland a recompense for the real losses they suffered during the Polish annexation” - we read in the article. (<http://www.rubaltic.ru/article/politika-i-obshchestvo/31082017-litva-vystavit-polshe-schet-za-okkupatsiyu-vilenskogo-kraya/>, 31.09.2017).

In the material about Vytautas Landsbergis, published in rubaltic.ru, the idea of giving the first leader of the independent Lithuania presidential status is commented by an „expert”, the former head of the pro-Moscow party Socialist People’s Front, sentenced by decision of Lithuanian court

for falsifying history, Algirdas Paleckis, presented by the editor as a politologist. Paleckis suggested that Landsbergis is still unofficially ruling Lithuania: „For many years he ruled Lithuania, he put his people on various posts, such like e. g. Dalia Grybauskaitė, not to mention people in special service, prosecutor’s office or the army” (<http://www.rubaltic.ru/article/politika-i-obshchestvo/01092017-algirdas-palets-kis-landsbergis-eto-politik-so-znakom-minus/> – 01.09.2017).

In the portal, there also appear Lithuanian politicians. In August, an interview was done with the former president Rolandas Paksas, who was, by the way, removed from the post for his suspicious contacts with Russia, and presently there is a court case in progress against him, the former president being accused of corruption. In the interview there appeared motifs concerning the cooperation of Landsbergis’ father with the KGB which might have helped the career of Vytautas Landsbergis himself.

Conclusion

Surely the presented week-long monitoring of the chosen media from the aspect of information concerning Lithuania, shows only a small section of a broad scale informational war run by the Kremlin against this country. It is worth emphasising that these are not the only media serving the Kremlin propaganda. In the offers of the operators of the nets of cable TV there are myriads of Russian or Russian speaking stations. In Lithuanian speaking television stations of the whole-country range there also are many programs produced in Russia. In March 2017, the Lithuanian Commission of Radio and Television published the results of a poll, from which it follows that in two all-country Lithuanian speaking TV channels, the Russian production occupied 35,5-38 % airtime per week and 44-49 % airtime per day. This shows the scale of the problem.

Lithuania, just like the other Baltic countries, is more susceptible to Kremlin propaganda than the countries of the West or of the former socialist bloc, due to the common command of the Russian language. Besides, quite a large part of the society (about 30%; among the Russian minority – 60%) feels nostalgia for the USSR times. Russian propaganda, raising the nationalist issues (like e.g. the Polish-Lithuanian conflict around Vilnius from the inter-war times) is well received by the nationalist-minded social group, sceptic towards the European Union. National minorities (constituting around 15% of the country’s population) are another group to whom this kind of message is directed. They are susceptible to Russian propaganda for a number of reasons: their weak or average command of the national language, especially as concerns elderly people, and their seeking non-Lithuanian language sources of information; a habit to watch Russian television, which projects also onto the younger generations. It is worth adding that very often the offer of Russian TV station is much more attractive than the offer of Lithuanian ones.

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