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Narratives on the Latvian National Armed Forces in the Russian Language Information Environment

The 2019 study on Latvian society's willingness to defend the state found that only 34% of Latvian society who use the Russian language in their families trusted the Latvian National Armed Forces (LNAF), as opposed to 78% of those who use the Latvian language. This raised the question – why are there such pronounced differences in the attitude towards the LNAF in both language groups? One of the possible explanations could be related to what information about the LNAF is available in the Russian-language information space because according to the data of the same study, 96% of the population who use Russian in their families also obtain information about events in Latvia and the world in Russian. The issue prompted to conduct a qualitative content analysis of the articles about LNAF in the Russian language internet portals

The paper addresses four interrelated research questions:

1. What are the thematic categories forming the image of the LNAF in the Russian language information space?

2. What types of media content (news, interviews, opinion pieces, etc.) were used in the Russian language information space in connection with the LNAF?

3. What types of information (facts and / or opinions) related to the LNAF were used in the Russian language information space?

4. What narratives (statements in which the essence of a broader view is concentrated) about the LNAF can be found in the Russian-language information space?

The empirical part of the paper is based on the analysis of 478 articles published in 2019 in the 10 most popular Russian language portals in Latvia. The selection of portals consists of the Russian language versions of Latvia's most popular portals Rus.delfi.lv; Rus.tvnet.lv and Rus.jauns.lv; Latvia's Russian-language audience-oriented portals Mixnews.lv, BB.lv and Press.lv; Daugavpils regional portal Gorod.lv; Latvian public media portal Rus.lsm.lv, as well as portals of Russian international information agency "Rossiya Segodnya" LV.sputniknews.ru and LV.baltnews.com. The qualitative content analysis was conducted by using the grounded theory approach, which obtains analytical categories from data.

The themes of the articles were grouped into generalized categories, which provide an opportunity to structure and analyze the elements forming the image of the LNAF in the Russian language information space. Articles were also coded according to the type of media content and information. The thematic categories were defined by the title and the introductory paragraph, which contain the most important information about the article, while the type of media content and information was identified based on the overall structure of the article and the information expressed in it. Thus, each article was assigned three codes: 1) theme; 2) type of media content; 3) type of information. Coding principles were designed and developed in the researcher's interpretation, working with empirical material. Media content analysis was performed using computerized qualitative text analysis in the MAXQDA program.

The identification of narratives was done at the concluding stage of the study by analyzing in detail articles on topics on which the media expressed opinions rather than facts, as the term "narrative" in the context of this study is understood as an interpretation of an event arising from or forming a broader story. These articles were analyzed line by line to understand how the context for information about the NAF is formed.

The data obtained in the study allow us to conclude that Russian-language portals focused on issues related to civil-military relations, but mainly reported on crimes, accidents, and incidents. They mainly publish news and facts about LNAF, except for the portals of information agency "Rossiya Segodnya", whose content is dominated by facts and opinions. In this way, these Russian portals purposefully form and promote opinion about the LNAF. The narratives found on Russian portals contributed to the Kremlin's views on international security policy issues, and they were mostly negative and critical of the LNAF and NATO partners. Within these portals it was possible to identify a special style of opinion-forming with such techniques as loosely and logically unrelated integration of various topics in one article; removing statements of officials from context and giving them other meaning; generalization of individual events; failure to use verified and comparable data in argumentation, and other. It was also possible to find a tendency that Russian portals widely use Latvian media content, but this information is interpreted within the framework of narratives promoted by these portals.