

## Research Article

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# Living in confronting or parallel strategic narratives? The reasons behind the missing security dialogue between Russia and the Baltic States

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**Abstract:** The current study discusses differences between Russia and the Baltic States in terms of their strategic narratives, as well as how they interpret key terms and concepts in the field of security. To frame the scope of the study, the strategic narrative of Russia for the Baltic countries and the Baltic strategic narrative(s) for Russia are compared and analysed. Both sides are also locked within the bigger framework of European Union's economic sanctions against Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance's deterrence concept. On the other hand, the Baltic States and Russia have a lot to gain from possible improvements in economic relations and reduction of regional security tensions.

**Keywords:** Strategic narrative; Russia, Baltic States

## 1 Introduction

The Russo–Georgian War and Crimean annexation have revealed a gap between strategic and historical narratives, political discourses and moral assessments of Russia and of the member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). There are some visible examples of contradicting paradigms and misinterpretations. For example, Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 was unambiguously condemned by the Western countries (including the Baltic States) as a violent act that undermines global rule-based order, the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine and infringes international law (see e.g. European Union, 2017), while Vladimir Putin (representing the Russian political elite) has argued that Russia had the right to do that, relying on the common historical legacy of Crimea and Russia and actual force deployment in the area. He also stated that no violation of international law has taken place related to Ukraine in 2013–2014 and called other countries, from the United States and Germany up to the Baltic States, to understand Russia's recent action based on their own historical experience (President of Russia, 2014). While the Baltic States consider Russia as a significant, or even the most significant, threat to their national security (Dennison et al., 2018), the Russian political elite shares the view that Russia intends to act as a key security provider in the region; however, the Baltic region is not their priority in the strategic level (e.g. Gerasimov, 2016; Rogozin, 2011; Karaganov and Suslov, 2018).

Accordingly, the reaction of the Russian population to the economic and targeted sanctions that were imposed on Russia during the Ukrainian conflict differed in many aspects from what the Western (including Baltic) politicians and experts expected (Kovalin, 2016; Fituni 2019): instead of blaming Vladimir Putin for his unacceptable behaviour, Russians actually blamed the United States and the West for the oil crisis and believed that they used Ukraine and the Crimea as an excuse to force Russia onto its knees (Kovalin, 2016; Borovsky, 2019; Fituni 2019) and into economic decline. Moreover, despite the similar terms and expressions that are used in public statements and political declarations by the Russian political elite and the Baltic leaders, the two counterparties seem to talk “a different security and defence

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language” because the meaning of some terms (deterrence, sanctions, security, international reputation, etc.) and key concepts (rule-based global order) differ radically among Russian and Baltic professional communities (Istomin et al. 2019; Ponomareva and Frolov 2019).

The current article aims to discuss the fundamental differences between Russia and the Baltic States in terms of the aspects on which they build up their strategic narratives as well as how they interpret some key terms and concepts in the field of security. This might be caused by differences in how both sides see each other, interpret historical events and understand some key security concepts. In this respect, having two separate monologues instead of a common ground for a dialogue is not only counterproductive, but it could also pose a serious threat in terms of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. As a result, there seems to be less and less dialogue in recent years between Russian and Baltic experts in political, military and academic circles.

The article is structured as follows. Section 1 presents the theoretical framework of the study, referring to possible mirroring and the phenomenon of social representations. Section 2 gives a broad overview of what Russia thinks of the present world order and Baltic regional security and how this affects the country’s behaviour in the regional arena. Sections 3 and 4 go into more detail in this respect and give some examples of fundamental differences between Russia and the Baltic countries as regards contradicting historical and strategic narratives. The article compares the national strategic narrative of Russia for the Baltic countries and the main characteristics of the Baltic strategic narrative for Russia. Section 5 points to the risks that are associated with the current approach, referring to the manner in which, currently, debates and discussions on this topic take place in Russia and in the Baltic States. This helps to identify some obstacles that prevent political leaders, analysts and researchers from understanding what Russia might be actually thinking with its statements related to regional security and ambitions.

## 2 Theoretical background: mirroring and the phenomenon of social representations

The reasons behind the misperceptions and the lack of a dialogue between Russia and the Baltic countries could be linked to the ancient story about blind men describing the elephant using their hands as their “eyes”. As matters turned out, the descriptions of those men varied depending on what part of an animal – trunk, tusk, body or ear – they touched and what they were expecting in advance based on their previous experience. The story concludes that people make conclusions based on their expectations, subjective and limited knowledge, and experience and often ignore other people’s knowledge and experience.

This mirroring effect, as we call it, also applies to the question of why Russia and the Western countries, referring, for example to the Baltic States, see the security agents, ambitions and dynamics so differently (but not necessarily contradictorily) in terms of aims, ambitions, centres of gravity and red lines. As we shall see in the following sections, both sides rely on their previous experiences, knowledge and behavioural patterns and, on this basis, make conclusions about the expectations and behavioural patterns of the others.

The tendency of applying similar logic, expectations and behavioural patterns to all subjects is also linked to more general questions, such as why is Russia not deterred, why is it not changing its aggressive behaviour and why is it not begging for forgiveness for its actions despite the efforts of the NATO and the EU countries, consisting of imposing economic sanctions, as well as international condemnation and stigmatisation of Russia (Veebel and Markus 2016).

The astonishment of the Western politicians and analysts clearly arises from the rationale that “Russia should be deterred, because we would be deterred if we were in their place”. Again, the vision of the Western countries, the EU or even NATO that Russia should be deterred is directly linked to the manner in which the EU and the NATO, including the Baltic States, see themselves. The Western world, to a large part, identifies itself through the concept of normative power, suggesting that these countries have the ability to change “the other”.<sup>1</sup> In this concept, other countries are seen as target countries to be forced or persuaded into accepting the export of certain norms, rules and practices. In this manner, the Western world expects the psychological and behavioural patterns of the West and of Russia to overlap and does not consider Russia as an independent cultural space, but rather a quasi-value space that adopts Western normative

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1 About the concept of normative power, see, e.g. Gerrits, 2009; Manners, 2001; and others.

values and accepts widely prevalent postmodern narratives prioritising political and social stability, economic welfare, peaceful solutions to conflicts and a rules-based global order. However, this concept has low practical value if there is no sociopolitical comfort zone to maintain, no economic welfare to lose, and no rules-based global order and non-violent organisation of society to preserve in Russia today.

One explanation to this type of misperceptions could be linked to the theory of social representations formed by Serge Moscovici in the early 1960s (Moscovici, 1984). According to the theory of social representations, unprecedented situations, unknown phenomena and unusual events disrupt the normal course of things and raise worry and vigilance. This motivates different social groups that are involved with the emergence of this situation, phenomenon or event to investigate it with the aim to understand it, to control it or even to defend themselves from it (the latter is called inference pressure phenomenon). So, according to the theory of social representations, information, beliefs, hypotheses and speculations are shared in different social groups, which in turn leads to the emergence of their majority positions. The process is facilitated by the fact that individuals deal with information selectively, focussing on particular aspects based on their expectations and the orientations of the group (Rateau et al., 2012). Accordingly, the theory of social representations suggests that people's aspiration to sense and explain the things around them is closely linked to the wish to protect their own identity against some shocks.

### 3 The roots and context of Russia's strategic narrative

The roots of the debate on Russia's overall strategic narrative lie in the manner in which Russia has positioned itself after the end of the Cold War in the 1990s. It has been argued that after the collapse of the Soviet Union (or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), Russia has lost two of its status symbols, such as the communist ideology (in contrast to the liberal democracy) and the system of allies in the former Soviet bloc. However, the country maintained three other status symbols, referring first, to Russia as the biggest country in the World by its territory; second, to the country's permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council; and third, to Russia's nuclear arsenal (Istomin et al., 2019). Based on these three status symbols, such as size, representation and capabilities, Russia started to develop its new identity in the 1990s and is exploiting them currently also in restoring its position as a Great Power in the world arena (Karaganov and Suslov, 2018).

Overall, in the 1990s, Russia accepted the idea of a multipolar world with many "power centres" (the Primakov doctrine), but not the idea of a unipolar world with the US as a single power centre (Karaganov, 2018). Whereas the multipolar approach was considered prestigious for Russia because the country considered itself as one of those "powers", together with the US, the EU, China and Japan, the idea of a unipolar world with the supremacy of the US was humiliating for Russia (Svarin, 2016). Intriguingly, the multipolar approach allowed Russia to emotionally achieve its status symbols, but at the same time, the country clearly lacked the resources to fully accomplish its multipolar ideology in the global arena. So, in the following years, Russia realised that the time of a multipolar world is over for Russia because the country does not have enough resources to oppose the US. To avoid the loss of prestige in the global arena, Russia developed an ideology of "selective multipolarity", meaning that from time to time, Russia returns to the multipolar ideology particularly in its relations with the EU with the aim to strengthen Russia's positions in Europe in comparison with the Western countries (Karaganov, 2018). This allows the country to demonstrate that Russia is as important as the Western countries, as far as the security environment in Europe is concerned. Russia has also recently used the same pattern, for example in stressing its role in "stabilising" the Ukrainian conflict following France and Germany, in guaranteeing the Minsk agreements (Veebel and Ploom, 2016) and in interfering in various conflict situations in other places such as Syria and Venezuela. It is vital for Russia, in terms of its special reputation and status, to demonstrate its ability to play an important role in the global arena; however, based on its limited resources, the country very carefully selects its opponents, allies and conflict locations (Istomin et al. 2019).

Furthermore, it has been argued that historically, Russia's strategic narrative is closely related to the country's territorial history, combined with a strong dimension of multiculturalism. In more detail, Russia's strategic narrative pays a lot of attention on the unity; however, it seems to be more about territorial unity and not so much about ethnic unity (Pääbo, 2011). Thus, the protection of the country's territory against external pressure and invasion seems to be an important component of both Russia's strategic narrative and domestic image. Stoicescu (2015) argues that Kremlin's

propaganda involves constantly accusing the Western countries of provoking Russia politically and economically and of interfering in Russia's internal affairs with the aim to bring the country to its knees and to topple Putin's administrative regime. He concludes that the main purpose of this narrative is to exploit the fear of the Western countries against war, as well as to increase their readiness to make compromises as far as Russia's ambitions and actions are concerned (Stoicescu, 2015). Accordingly, it is not surprising that, today, Russia depicts the NATO alliance also as a force that threatens Russia (Ponomareva and Frolov, 2019). Ethnically, Russia considers all ethnic groups living on Russia's territory as parts of the Russian civilisation and culture (Pääbo, 2011). Furthermore, ethnic Russians or Russian-speaking communities in e.g. Ukraine, Moldova, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and even the Baltic countries, considered the "near abroad" regions, are considered to be under the sphere of influence of Russia because of the Soviet past and the Russian-speaking minorities living there.

## 4 Russia's strategic narrative for the Baltic countries

The strategic narrative of Russia for the Baltic countries reflects Russia's vision of selective multipolarity, its intention to protect Russia's territory against external pressure and, finally, the country's aspiration to retain the countries with ethnic Russians or Russian-speaking communities under the sphere of influence of Russia (Svarin 2016). All these aspects are reflected in the manner in which Russia describes and treats its small neighbours in the Baltic region. The following examples of Russia's arguments in building up the country's strategic narratives for the Baltic States are derived from articles published in the Russian journals "*Международная Жизнь*"<sup>2</sup> ("*The International Affairs*") over the past few years and *Vestnik MGIMO Universiteta*.<sup>3</sup>

Based on the articles published in the journal "*Международная Жизнь*", it could be stated that Russia constantly spreads the message that the Baltic countries are small and unimportant, and that it would be reasonable for the Western countries to accept it and to treat the Baltics accordingly. An article of Vladimir Olenchko, "Russia and the Baltic countries: the outlines of the concept of mutual relations" ("*Россия и страны Балтии: контуры концепции двусторонних отношений*") is a good example of this. Vladimir Olenchenko (2016) argues that the profile of the Baltic countries radically differs in the eyes of the Western countries and of Russia: according to his assessment, the Baltic countries are overestimated in the eyes of the Western world, while Russia assesses them objectively. Olenchenko stresses that the economic potential of the Baltic States is weak and relies mostly on international firms, and that Russia is making efforts to "objectively" explain to others that the role of those countries in the world economy is modest. In the political landscape, Olenchenko classifies the Baltic countries as post-Soviet countries or mixed-type countries, based on the argument that in these societies, support for Russia is basically equal to the support for the Western values. He relies on the argument that in the long-term perspective, in the parliamentary or local government elections in the Baltic countries, neither the supporters of the "Western wing" nor the supporters of the "Russian wing" (Olenchko calls them "supporters of the historical-geographical traditional direction") have gained absolute majority. As a conclusion, he calls the Western countries to "objectively" accept the fact that there exist significant Russian-minded attitudes in the Baltic countries and to treat them accordingly. Furthermore, Vladimir Olenchenko quotes Hillary Clinton who, allegedly, according to Olenchenko's statement, has stated during the recent presidential debate that the US cannot afford to not pay attention to the Baltic countries anymore, as the latter (referring particularly to Latvia) would immediately turn towards Russia then (Оленченко, 2016).

Thus, Olenchenko – in many ways – diminishes the role of the Baltic countries in both regaining their national sovereignty and achieving political and economic success. First, he describes the process of restoration of independence of the Baltic countries in the 1990s as a fluctuation between "maintaining traditional relations based on historical

<sup>2</sup> The monthly journal "*Международная Жизнь*" is a journal of Russia's Foreign Ministry, which covers a variety of subjects in international politics, diplomacy and global security. As the Russian political elite defines it, the journal is among the world's key forums for discussions of international policy issues. The Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, presides over the International Affairs Council. For further information, see <https://interaffairs.ru/>

<sup>3</sup> The *MGIMO Review of International Relations* is a peer-reviewed journal on international relations, which publishes articles in the subject category «Political Science and International Relations». For further information, see <https://vestnik.mgimo.ru/jour/about/editorialPolicies#focusAndScope>

and geographical relations” and simultaneously developing contacts with the Western European countries. He spreads doubts about the belief that dominates in the Baltic countries that they have achieved national sovereignty as a result of the self-development evolution and further argues that it was just one possible movement or direction in those societies that occurred within the framework of *perestroika*. Second, Olenchenko also argues that the current potential of the Baltic countries is a result of the exploitation of the opportunities Russia has made available for them. In this way, Olenchenko basically says that the Baltic countries should be grateful for Russia for enhancing the development and progress of these countries. Third, Vladimir Olenchenko argues that should the confrontation with Russia be excluded, it is difficult to find common ground among the three Baltic countries, as they differ significantly in their ethnic and religious backgrounds, in geographical orientations of the local elite, in living standards, and so on. Last but not the least, Olenchenko suggests not using the name *Pribaltica* in the Russian rhetoric when the Baltic countries are mentioned, because, for Russians, this is associated with spending summer holidays in a nice place. Instead, he suggests using the expression “Baltic stripes” (in Russian: *полоса*), which is more in accordance with the geographical location of those countries, referring to a narrow stripe between Russia and the Baltic Sea. Olenchenko argues that it would also help the Western countries to remind themselves about what they are actually talking about when fuelling the “political and military hysteresis” of those countries (see Оленченко, 2016).

As far as the role of the Baltic countries in the transatlantic NATO alliance is concerned, Russia seems to stress the argument that the Baltic countries position themselves in the alliance as border countries, keeping in mind their geographical borders with Russia. This is also reflected in the statement of Vladimir Olenchenko, arguing that the Baltics were inspired by the leaders of NATO, who spread the idea of locating military contingency of the leading NATO countries in this region. Olenchenko argues that the argument of “external threat” is also used in internal matters in the Baltic countries, including political struggles between political parties in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (Оленченко, 2016).

The message about “weak, unimportant and ungrateful” Baltic countries is spread also by other Russian analysts and researchers. For example, Andrei Skatchov (2018) argues that some researchers in the Baltic countries call the Soviet period, referring particularly to the 1960s and 1970s, the “Golden age”, and that during the period of regained sovereignty, the Baltic countries have not managed to show significant success and to socially converge to the Scandinavian countries and other “old” Western European countries (Скачков, 2017). Security risks that are associated with the Baltic region are also highlighted in the Russian rhetoric. Just to highlight some of the most pronounced statements in this field, Russian analysts have argued that, currently, the Baltic region imposes a security threat not only to the countries that are the members of the EU, but to the whole of Europe, and that a military parade of the NATO alliance in one of the Estonian cities, in Narva in 2015 to celebrate Estonia’s independence day, was considered as a symbol of the next level in the military threats that the West is posing for Russia (Межевич, 2016).

Russia’s current rhetoric in diminishing and blaming the Baltic countries could be somewhat linked to the past experiences of Russia. On the one hand, a former Russian expert, Aleksandr Sōtin, argues that Russia has made some miscalculations in the past as far as the Baltic countries are concerned. For example, Sōtin states that Russia was expecting the Baltic countries to come and to beg for the restoration of transit flows several years ago, but something like this actually did not happen. Moreover, Russia was expecting that the Baltics would support the Nord Stream project, but this did not happen, too (Piirsalu, 2018). Furthermore, some Russian media channels and policy analysts have interpreted the recent visit of the President of Estonia, Kersti Kaljulaid, to Moscow as a sign of weakness and argued that even those countries that have initially advocated strongly for sanctions against Russia have finally realised that it is more useful to be friends and to trade with Russia (see Fefilov, 2019). This does not leave much room for cooperation upon even terms between Russia and the Baltic States. For Russians, Russia will stay “great and strong” and the Baltic States will be “small and weak”.

Another important issue that seems to trouble Russia about Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania is related to the situation and status of Russian minorities in the Baltic countries. Russian high-level politicians systematically raise this issue in the media and publicly criticise Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. For example, recently the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, has criticised the idea of joint schools for Russian-speaking and Estonian-speaking children and called it unacceptable, because – in his opinion – this idea is not in the best interests of the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia (Russkiy Mir, 2019). So, from Russia’s perspective, it has the right to protect Russian-speaking minorities in other countries. Furthermore, Russia has relied on this argument both in Ukraine and in Georgia, declaring its responsibility



for the protection of the rights of certain vulnerable social segments of its neighbouring countries, referring to the unacceptable conditions of the Russian-speaking population in those countries (Veebel, 2017; Schatz, 2007).

Russian studies also stress on “Global Anti-Russian coalition”, referring not only to the Baltic countries but also to the NATO Alliance and the US in general. In more detail, studies (Ellyatt, 2016; Ponomareva and Frolov, 2019; Karaganov, 2018; Veebel 2019) have revealed that the Russian political elite is trying to construct the identity of the “Russian world” that is based on the positive attitude towards a joint communist past, and that any attempts to oppose this narrative are considered as attacks against the collective identity of Russia, and consequently, as a threat to Russia’s security.

## 5 The Baltic narratives on Russia

After the restoration of independence in 1991, the Baltic States have constantly struggled with redefining their relationship with their biggest neighbour, Russia. On the one hand, from the 1990s onwards, the Baltic strategic narratives have been mostly grounded on the argument that they have the right to be a sovereign country based on both legal and historic grounds, and that Russia has – on many occasions – violated this right (Veebel 2015). Moreover, the historical narrative is characterised by the differentiation between local nations and Russians. Pääbo (2011) argues that Russians are described through a negative prism, stating that Russians have played a significant role in all “big wars” that have taken place in the Baltic States and that Russia has, over the course of history, been an “uninvited interferer”, against whom the Baltic nations have been endeavouring to combat. This view is, to some extent, opposed by Eerik-Niiles Kross, who states that, nowadays, at least Estonians have accepted that many Russian-speaking people live in Estonia and Estonians do not feel threatened by them; however, a differentiation is still made between “us” and “them” (Sirp, 2015).

On the other hand, the Baltic States have had to revise their strategic narrative of Russia in the recent past. In the early 2000s, many international organisations (e.g. NATO and the EU) considered Russia as a partner and not as an adversary, which contradicted the Estonian viewpoint. For example, at this time, NATO repositioned itself from an organisation committed to the principle of collective defence into a multitasking body dealing with issues beyond the initial idea of collective defence. This means also that the focus of the organisation shifted from Russia to other topics, such as anti-terrorism activities, peace-keeping missions and crisis management (Andžāns and Veebel 2017). Furthermore, the world political leaders expressed their support for Russia. For example, in 2004, George W Bush announced that the US stands shoulder to shoulder with Russia in fighting terrorism, and so on. This situation was relatively confusing for the Baltic nations in the sense that it was unclear how far the cooperation between the US and Russia is going to develop, and whether both countries are fighting against the “same enemy” or might realise later on that they are fighting against different enemies for different purposes (Kasekamp and Veebel 2007). This means that the Baltic nations had to revise their strategic narrative for Russia, too, and had to accept that other countries might see Russia differently and more positively.

The situation changed cardinally after the outbreak of the Georgian war in 2008 and the Ukrainian conflict in 2014. During the conflicts, the political leaders of the Baltic States had many times condemned Russia’s actions, expressed their support for Georgia and Ukraine, and so on. So, whereas the Baltic States had, in the early 2000s, gone along with the strategic narrative of the Western countries describing Russia as a partner and not as an enemy, they had to be disappointed again, because this vision of Russia was actually not true. Therefore, it is understandable why the Baltic States see their role today quite often as a “watchdog” among the Western countries, as someone who needs to remind the democratic countries of Russia’s unacceptable behaviour, which, generally, overlaps with the narrative of a “truth teller”, as someone who needs to reveal to the world all the erroneous interpretations of the Second World War that Russia is constantly spreading (Veebel 2016).

The Baltic strategic narrative of Russia today is also strongly influenced by the security threats stemming from Russia as well as from the visible Russian neo-imperial ambitions and activities in neighbouring countries (Veebel 2017).

Both the systematic development of the national defence forces and the debates on national security guarantees are clearly driven in all three Baltic countries by the fear of potential Russian aggression. The National Security Concept of Latvia is the most detailed key strategy document in this respect, drawing to an extent on the steps and policies

taken by Russia in Ukraine (The National Security Concept of Latvia, 2015, pp. 5–28). The National Security Concept of Latvia makes the following observations: Russia has developed high readiness and mobile military units; Russia uses complex hybrid measures aimed at gradually weakening the country by instrumentalising the potential of protests and discontent in society; its other measures include economic sanctions, the suspension of energy supply, humanitarian influence, informative propaganda, psychological influence, cyberattacks, aggressive influence agents, external diplomatic and military pressure, and the enforcement and legitimisation of alternative political processes; creating a conflict area near its border, in which the transition from peaceful existence to crisis and later to war is very difficult to identify; and the creation of a fictional notion that NATO causes external threats due to its internal policy, allowing the Russian government to rally society and make it loyal to the current government (Śliwa et al. 2018).

The National Security Strategy of Lithuania also stresses Russian aggression against its neighbouring countries, the annexation of Crimea, the concentration of modern military equipment in Russia, its large-scale offensive capabilities and the exercises near the borders of Lithuania, especially in the Kaliningrad Region. It also highlights Russia's capacity for using a combination of military and economic means, energy, information, and other non-military measures against its neighbours; Russia's ability to exploit and create internal problems for the neighbouring states; and Russia's readiness to use nuclear weapons even against states that do not possess them (National Security Strategy of Lithuania, 2017).

The National Security Concept of Estonia argues that Russia is interested in restoring its position in the global arena and is not afraid to come into sharp opposition to Western countries and the Euro-Atlantic collective security system. The strategy document admits that Russia uses political, diplomatic, informational, economic and military means to achieve its objectives, as well as the fact that Russia has strengthened its armed forces and increased its military presence on the borders of NATO member states (National Security Concept of Estonia, 2017). However, the overall tone of the Russian-related statements in the National Security Concept of Estonia seems to be slightly more modest than those of Latvia and Lithuania.

Furthermore, the latest annual report of the Estonian Intelligence Security Service dedicates about two-thirds of its volume on various threats stemming from Russia. The report sets out that *“the main external security threat for Estonia arises from Russia's behaviour, which undermines the international order. ¼/Ukraine will be the main target of those measures this year, but Russia will not hesitate to use them even against its ally, Belarus. ¼/Countries in the European Union and NATO are not fully protected from Russia's aggressive activities”*. The report reaches four main conclusions that directly refer to Russia's threatening behaviour. First, that the Russian armed forces are consistently practising for an extensive military conflict with NATO, whereby all scenarios for Russia's command post exercises over the past two decades have relied on conventional warfare against NATO and its member states and the structure of the Russian warfare scenarios and exercises has remained the same all that time, despite the fact that, in the meanwhile, NATO has deployed its forces in the Baltic States and Poland (Sliwa et al. 2018). Second, the report argues that the trigger of a military conflict between Russia and NATO will be a “coloured revolution” in one of Russia's neighbouring countries, most likely in Belarus. Accordingly, the Baltic States have to be prepared for a military incursion from Russia's direction even if the conflict between Russia and NATO is sparked by events elsewhere in the world, because for Russia, the Baltic countries constitute this part of NATO that would be the easiest for Russia to attack in times of a crisis and to shift the balance of military power on the Baltic Sea region in its favour (Veebel 2019). A conflict between NATO and Russia would not be limited to military action in Eastern Europe or the Baltic countries, but it would also involve Russian attacks on Western European targets, as the Russian armed forces are constantly developing their doctrine of attacking “critical enemy targets” and building related medium-range weapon systems that could be used to attack targets in Western Europe (Veebel and Sliwa 2019).

Last but not the least, the most illustrative quote reflecting Estonia's security risks and fears today comes from Colonel Riho Ühtegi, the Head of the National Defence League, who emotionally stated that *“The Russians can get to Tallinn in two days.... Maybe. But they can't get all of Estonia in two days. They can get to Tallinn, and behind them, we will cut their communication lines and supplies lines and everything else. They can get to Tallinn in two days. But they will die in Tallinn. And they know this. ¼ They will get fire from every corner, at every step”* (McKew, 2018). All this demonstrates that the current strategic narrative in Estonia considers Russia as an adversary, mainly for securitisation purposes.

To sum up, over the past decades, the Baltic States have – in many ways – attempted to break ties with Russia. Furthermore, they have both systematically developed their defence forces to safeguard their security (Andžāns and Veebel, 2017; Cooper, 2018) as well as contributed to the NATO Alliance with the aim of benefitting from the Alliance's

deterrence model and to gain guarantees for stability and peace in the Euro-Atlantic region. Based on the national strategic narrative, Russia clearly remains as an adversary for the Baltic States, and other potential visions, such as “Baltic countries as a bridge between East and West” (Veebel and Markus 2018) or “Baltic States as positive influencers” (i.e. someone who could encourage Russia to implement reforms and to become a democratic society), are clearly “out of the picture” today. The lack of trust in Russia was most recently reflected in the public reaction to the announcement of the visit of the President of Estonia, Ms Kersti Kaljulaid, to Russia in April 2019, after many years without high-level visits between the two countries. Local politicians have mostly used either a “wait-and-see”-approach or have been critical as far as the aims of the visit and the manner in which it was organised is concerned (see e.g. Eesti Rahvusringhääling/ Estonian Public Broadcasting [ERR], 2019a; ERR; 2019b). No significant results were expected from this visit in Estonia, and even less in Latvia and Lithuania. However, in practice, this was the first high-level effort to rewrite the current strategic narrative of the Baltic States for Russia as an enemy and to replace it with a new one, of the Baltic States as a bridge between the East and the West.

## 6 Can current key terminology produce a strategic dialogue between Russia and the Baltic States?

The former analysis indicates that the strategic narratives of Russia and the Baltic States are, in many aspects, pointing in different directions; there are some differences, particularly in the manner in which both sides interpret the common historical past, recognise the validity of international law and understand their roles in the international arena. As far as the strategic narratives of Russia and the Baltic States are concerned, for example the narrative of the “Russian world” where the countries are happy about the common communist past is completely incompatible with the narrative of the Baltic States as “truth tellers” in NATO and the EU. Another problem that seems to trouble Russia about the “truth teller” narrative of the Baltic countries is associated with the aspirations of those countries to reveal to the world all the erroneous interpretations of the Second World War that Russia is constantly spreading. The same applies to the “watchdog” narrative of the Baltic countries, referring to the need to remind the Western democracies of Russia’s unacceptable behaviour. Russia seemingly does not agree with the strategic narrative of the Baltic countries that they have the right to be a sovereign country and that Russia has, on many occasions, violated this right, too. However, to be precise in this context, it has to be stated that – as Aleksandr Sõtin sees it – today, Russia might already be somewhat used to the idea that the Baltic countries are independent states, and that both the Russia’s political elite and local diplomats think of the Baltic countries only in the context that although NATO has promised not to accept these countries as members of the strategic defence alliance, it has still done it and is currently expanding its military capabilities in the Baltic Sea region.

Moreover, the fact that Russia is constantly blaming the Baltic countries for violating the rights of Russian minorities in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania should be considered as a “normal process”, because Russia just has to justify its vision of Russophobic enemies surrounding the country. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania seem to be only “secondary” countries for Russia in this context, and the main aspect that makes the Baltic countries interesting for Russia is their NATO and EU membership (Istomin et al. 2019; Veebel 2018).

Contradicting strategic narratives of Russia and of the West impose a serious problem to mutual relations. Despite the numerous analyses on similar topics that both sides have published and the many conferences and debates they have organised to discuss what others think of them, today, there seems to be no real dialogue between Russia and the Western world. The manner in which both the Western and Russian analysts and researchers discuss the motives and actions of their opponent is closely linked to their own knowledge, experience and logic about how things should work out and much less related to the manner in which the opponent sees and understands things. Thus, the lack of dialogue is clearly caused by differences in how both sides see each other, interpret historical events and protect their own identity. However, having two separate monologues instead of a common ground for a dialogue is not only useless but could also pose a serious threat in terms of misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

It cannot be excluded that misunderstandings and misinterpretations as well as lack of a dialogue are also linked to the manner in which both sides understand and interpret some terms and concepts. The author would hereby like to highlight two examples, referring to the interpretations of the terms *deterrence* and *war*.



In the Western countries, the term *deterrence* has a relatively universal meaning, i.e. the discouragement of an opponent to prevent undesirable behaviour. The discouragement is mostly related to increased costs or reduced gains of the opponent (see e.g. Van der Putten et al., 2015). However, the term *deterrence* does not seem to have a similarly clear meaning in the Russian language. In this respect, Russians use mostly the following terms: *sderzivanie* (*сдерживание*), *ustrašenie* (*устрашение*), *prinuzdenie* (*принуждение*) and *uderzanie* (*удержание*). At the same time, all these terms are not synonyms in the Russian language and have their own meaning and interpretation. Furthermore, for example the terms *sderzivanie* and *uderzanie* are related to each other but are not overlapping (Veebel and Ploom 2019).

In more detail, the Russian military community mostly uses the terms *sderzivanie*, *ustrašenie* and *prinuzdenie* for referring to deterrence. Overall, the noun *sderzivanie* is mostly used in a military context and far less in the diplomatic sphere, in legal matters and economic issues and in the general vocabulary (Словарь<sup>1/4</sup> 2019a). For example, the term *sderzivanie* is used in the Russian language to refer to nuclear deterrence (*сдерживание. ядерное сдерживание*). However, the verb *sderzivat* is widely used in the Russian language and has various meanings, which could also affect the manner in which the military term *deterrence* is interpreted in Russia. To highlight the variety of potential meanings of the term *sderzivat*, it could also refer to oppose or resist (*противостоять*), restrain or hold back (*удерживать*), keep (in the sense of keeping a promise) or even slowing down (*замедлять*). In geopolitics, the term *sderzivanie* is also associated with containment, e.g. *политика сдерживания* is translated in English as the policy of containment. Furthermore, in practice, the term *sderzivanie* is often used in the Russian language to historically refer to the idea that the opponent is forced to step out of the conflict after suffering heavy losses. This applies, for example to Russia's fight against Napoleon or Hitler. This means that the term is often placed in the reactive context in Russia.

Another term in the Russian language that could be linked to deterrence is *ustrašenie*, associated mostly with frightening and aggressive intimidation to get one's own way. This is particularly clearly reflected in the expression *устрашать врага*, which means not only to cause fear among the opponents (in Russian, this would be *пугать*) but to frighten them by "mightiness" and "greatness". The term *ustrašenie* is also mostly used in military parlance and less in other spheres (Словарь<sup>1/4</sup> 2019b).

The third term, *prinuzdenie*, is from time to time also used in Russian as an alternative to the term *deterrence*. In English, *prinuzdenie* means either coercion (for example, *физическое принуждение* means physical coercion, or *средства принуждения* is translated in English as coercive means), compulsion (*экономическое принуждение* means economic compulsion) or enforcement (like *принуждение к миру* is translated in English as peace enforcement).

Last but not the least, only seldom is the term *uderzanie* used in Russian to refer to deterrence. The equivalent of this expression in English is retention, withholding or deduction.

Thus, there seems to be no universal term in the Russian language that would be equivalent to the English term *deterrence*, but there exist several terms, such as *sderzivanie*, *ustrašenie*, *prinuzdenie* and *uderzanie*, with relatively similar meanings. However, the manner in which these terms are used in communication highly depends on the particular context. Moreover, without knowing the context, it is easy to misinterpret the "message" and instead of restraining somebody, one could feel, for example frightened.

The same applies to the word *war*. To come back to Kalev Stoicescu's statement, the main purpose of Russia's narrative is to exploit the fear of the Western countries against war and to increase their readiness to make compromises as far as Russia's ambitions and actions are concerned (see Stoicescu, 2015). At the same time, Russians themselves seem to have a completely different view about war. For example, Andrei Kolesnikov (2016) offers an in-depth insight into the manner in which Russians understand the concept of war and what meaning it has in the Russian society. Kolesnikov describes the ways in which Russia "sells" the war and concludes that the modern Russian political regime has elaborated a concept of war that enjoys considerable public support, and that Kremlin has succeeded in fostering a mythological sense of heroism as far as war is concerned. As Kolesnikov states, all this helps to convince the public that external aggression is actually part and parcel of a defensive war or part of a series of simple, low-cost military operations. Kolesnikov argues that "for Russians, war has replaced the refrigerator and the television", meaning that war has outstripped other concerns among Russia's domestic population, and that Russia's permanent war footing has become the primary means for Russian elites to keep themselves in power, and this discourse – wars that are fair, defensive, victorious and preventive – constructs the foundation for a heavily personalised regime.

Furthermore, Gudrun Persson (2018) analyses both Russia's doctrinal thinking and its political rhetoric, differentiating among the following: the strategic level ("an encircled Russia"), the policy level (discussion of the country's path of strategic solitude, an increased anti-Western stance and Russia's "special path" in a globalised

world), various ways of how Russia defines conflicts and wars (e.g. differentiation between an armed conflict and a military conflict, and between three different sorts of war: local, regional and large-scale war) and Russia's views about the use of soft power as an instrument of statecraft. She suggests that there are specific features of Russian national identity, such as priority for the spiritual over the material, collectivism, historical unity among the Russian people, the country's historical heritage, and an inevitable corollary that subjects of history are defended by the armed forces in Russia. Persson argues that, "In the Russian world, death is beautiful and that to die for one's friends, one's people, the Fatherland is beautiful" (Persson, 2018).

## 7 Conclusion

In recent years, Russia and the Western countries seem to speak different professional languages and to debate in parallel worlds in terms of regional security. The current strategic narratives of the Baltic countries for Russia are strongly influenced by the countries' historical experience and the security threats stemming from Russia. Russia, at the same time, is interested in maintaining its image as a global power in the international arena and is, therefore, using all possible means to diminish its small neighbours. Based on the national strategic narratives, both sides clearly remain adversaries today and seem to speak against improving mutual relations, too. Russia's current domestic image is based on the vision that "Russophobic" and "hysterical" enemies are surrounding the country. The country also prefers to use the ideology of "selective multipolarity", particularly in its relations with the EU, which allows the country to feel itself as being as important as the Western countries, as far as the security environment in Europe is concerned. Moreover, Russia constantly argues that, for example the Baltic countries do not respect the rights of the Russian minorities, and so on.

In this context, the blooming of mutual relations between the Baltic countries and Russia in the nearest future is rather unlikely. In the long term, this is, however, not a sustainable approach either, assuming that ongoing confrontation in the Baltic region creates instability and wastes resources. More recently, in spring 2019, Estonia made the first effort to rewrite the country's current strategic narrative for Russia as an enemy and to replace it with a new one, as the President of Estonia Kersti Kaljulaid visited Russia after many years without high-level visits between the two countries. However, there are some loose ends that should be potentially tied up, assuming that the Baltic countries are interested in developing contacts with Russia. First, in the future, the Baltic countries should carefully keep an eye on all EU initiatives that are targeted towards Russia, referring particularly to the upgrading of the EU–Russia cooperation programme and the calls for a "new partnership" with Russia that have been suggested by some EU member states within the framework of the European Strategic Autonomy initiative. Second, it would be reasonable for the Baltic countries to do everything in their power to reconcile differences between the Estonians and the Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia. This would leave Russia without its main argument in justifying its aggressive ambitions in the neighbouring countries, referring – as Russia sees it – to the "unacceptable conditions" of Russian-speaking minorities in those countries and Russia's "responsibility" for protecting the Russian-speaking population in those countries. Last but not the least, although a radical regime shift in Russia is rather unlikely because of the missing strong and united opposition and the lack of political alternatives in Russia, the Western countries, including the Baltic countries, should also be prepared for such potential developments. Consistent unrests in Russia over the past years are a clear sign that not all people in Russia welcome the direction that Vladimir Putin's Russia is currently heading in.

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