

The Estonian-Russian Border Negotiations: A Prelude to the Cyber-Attacks of 2007

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Abstract: Russian information warfare operations in neighbouring states – in the Baltic States and ex-Soviet republics in particular – form a complex system of activities. The operations are conducted under the doctrine of *near abroad* and for the purposes of influencing these states' decisions in ways considered favourable to Russian Federation. The Russian government has actively pursued the imposition of a dependent relationship upon the neighbouring states, with the desire to remain the region's dominant actor and political arbiter, continuing the Soviet pattern of hegemonic relations. After the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 and Russian military intervention in Ukraine (2014–present) in particular there has been an ever increasing interest in the Russian information warfare. Nevertheless, the subject is far from having been thoroughly studied as regards, for instance, the roots and development of Russian information operations. This study focuses on an early (2005) example of how current issues are intertwined with contradictory historical interpretations. The aim of this study is to examine the rhetoric and propagandistic messaging used by Russia in the context of the failed border negotiations between Estonia and Russia in 2005: Why were certain methods used? What was the essential aim of the messaging and why was this so? When this episode is compared with the better known 2007 cyber-attacks on Estonia it is evident that the border negotiations can be considered as a prelude to the latter one. In both cases the dispute was, in the first place, over the nature of Soviet annexation of the Baltic States. The main sources comprise published comments and interviews of the Russian highest political leaders (President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov) and Russian newspaper articles that dealt with the issue in 2005. Alongside the methods of rhetoric studies this research utilizes discourse and narrative analysis and propaganda studies.

Keywords: Russia, Estonia, information warfare, border negotiations, history

1. Introduction

This study presents one part of a broader research project focused on the images of the main issues of controversy between Estonia and Russia in 2005–2007 transmitted by the countries' media. The issues that were also most visible in the international media were the Estonian-Russian border negotiations (2005) and the relocation of a monument to Russian soldiers in Tallinn (2007). This study also concentrates on what kind of image two significant Russian newspapers, *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* (RosG; owned by the Russian government) and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (NezG; independent/opposition), gave of the border negotiations in May-June 2005 and why the image given by the newspapers was exactly a certain kind of image.

Analysis of the press in conjunction with the above-mentioned issues of controversy is particularly justifiable because the struggle to control images that appear in public is an inseparable and essential part of all conflicts as such. The parties involved in conflicts use many different methods and actively attempt to influence in such a way that newspaper articles would be dominated by material that is expedient from exactly their standpoint. Thus, newspapers that write about controversies between countries, peoples, or other interest groups unavoidably play at least a side role in the controversies when they filter information (and disinformation) they receive on the topic and convey it to their readers. It is also worth noting that all the material published in newspapers is in some way selected, reviewed and possibly modified by the editors. Thus, the role of the editorial staff needs to be evaluated in conjunction with all types of material. Of course, editorials most clearly express the newspaper's so-called official stand, but from the standpoint of created images they are only one type of material, and not always even the most important (Street 2011, p 25, 72, 172–173).

In this conjunction it is possible to only very summarily describe the general factors that affect newspapers' positions and articles. They include the paper's possible financial, political, cultural, religious, and other similar ties or at least sympathies and antipathies. In connection with such values and objectives newspapers intentionally and in part also unintentionally strive to defend issues they support and also convince their readers of their correctness. These attempts to influence are offset by the newspapers' commercial interests and inseparably related anticipation of their readers' expectations. Thus, on the one hand newspapers strive to influence their readers and on the other hand they attempt to comply with their readers' presumed opinions. In addition to this balancing act it should be noted that, depending on the situation, the values supported in principle by a newspaper may contradict each other. For example, a newspaper may be the organ of an

opposition party, but in some individual matter the government's policy may happen to be in line with the values supported by the newspaper. In that case the newspaper has to decide whether to support the government in that particular issue or carry on with its more principled policy of opposing the government. Or a newspaper may emphasize a pacifist policy, but in a certain situation the use of power (such as so-called humanitarian intervention) may seem justified. In that case a choice must be made between defending a broader world view and said use of power (Carruthers 2000, p 11–19; Street 2011, p 21–48).

In the case of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (in English "Independent Newspaper"), because the newspaper had a generally critical attitude toward the government, it is justifiable to examine particularly the newspaper's attitude toward the actions of the Russian government. On the other hand, because it was a question of a confrontation between Russia and Estonia, whether it wanted to or not, *NezG* as a Russian newspaper was in principle directly on the side of one of the parties. To what extent did the newspaper want to and was it able to separate itself from its governmental and national reference group and function as an "independent" conveyor of information, as its name implies?

Because this is a question of a study of images, it is necessary to also briefly refer to the related theoretical principles of studying historical images, which are used to support the analysis. Images, or mental models in the terms of cognitive psychology, are formed by the combined effect of physical reality and social environment. In other words, images are a combination of the knowledge, beliefs and attitudes affecting the creator/possessor of the images. In new situations the image formation is strongly influenced by the individual's or community's prior mental models, which steer him or them to observe or interpret matters in a way that fits previously adopted models as well as possible. Models defined by the individual's or community's entire history of experiences generally change only slowly or as a result of very strong experiences that contradict prior models (Fält 2002, pp 8–11; Ratz 2007, pp 191–203). In studying newspapers, these principles mean special attention must be paid to possible long-term influential factors that most likely cause the newspaper's editors to regard even topical political issues in accordance with previously established sets of values.

2. Progress of the negotiations and the intensity of writing

Border negotiations between Estonia and Russia have been held with varying intensity since 1992. However, they were not visibly covered in the media until the beginning of May 2005, when the negotiators finally reached a compromise agreement that appeared to be acceptable to both parties. Estonia's and Russia's Foreign Ministers, Urmas Paet and Sergey Lavrov, signed the agreement in Moscow on May 18, after which the agreement was sent to the parliaments of both countries for ratification. Estonia's parliament ratified the agreement on June 20, but appended to it a preamble that refers to the earlier Tartu peace treaty between Estonia and Russia dating back to 1920, the legal continuation of Estonia's independence since 1918, and Estonia's status under Russian occupation in 1940–1941 and 1944–1991 (Liik 2005). The preamble awakened plenty of sharp protests in Russia. Russia's parliament decided that summer not to ratify the agreement, and in the beginning of September President Putin announced that Russia annulled the signature of the May agreement (President of Russia, September 1, 2005). Thus the border agreement ran aground and the political deadlock associated with it still continues.

In a period of a little over two weeks in May both *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* published seven articles related to the topic. After that there was nearly a month long pause in writing until Estonia's parliamentary ratification proceedings in late June again made the agreement a current topic. The peak volume of articles took place in the end of June and the beginning of July, so that over the span of about one month *RosG* published altogether 15 articles and *NezG* 17 articles concerning the border agreement. No articles appeared in August 2005 (except one in *RosG* on August 15), but when Russia annulled its signature in the beginning of September one last, albeit lesser phase of writing followed. During the three-month period from the beginning of September to the beginning of December *RosG* published six articles and *NezG* seven articles on the topic. The periods of writing differed mainly in their intensity, which was directly connected to general interest in each phase from the standpoint of the media. The periods were nearly identical in terms of their content, i.e. the image they conveyed, and differences between the two newspapers were almost non-existent in either way.

3. The leaders of the Russian government as the main shaper of the image

The articles that appeared in May already formed a strong precedent according to which RosG and NezG also later conveyed information related to the border agreement and disputes. It can be seen that the created image was above all in accordance with the views of the Russian government. If of the 13 articles that were published we pay less attention to the six articles in the news section that primarily concentrated on reporting the content of the border agreement and the technical progress of the negotiations, we can more closely analyze the seven longer articles that took more of a stand on the topic. Four of them directly represented the stand of Russia's government (President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov), two came from the hand of NezG's and RosG's own editors, and one quoted Estonia's President Arnold Rüütel. The order of publication was exactly this, which fact was also significant from the standpoint of the created image in a way that soon became apparent.

Slightly generalizing, it can be said that Putin's, Lavrov's and editors' comments published in RosG on May 11 and in NezG on May 10 and May 12 already brought out all the main elements of the conveyed image, and the newspaper's publishing of information during the following six months only repeated these initial positions with minor variations. Russia's government made its stand known in these initial comments in an aggressive, propagandistic, and accusatory way that took on the universal features of the enemy. The texts of RosG's and NezG's editors complied with the former, and Estonians' comments were partly used for the same purpose. The published material in its entirety clearly predicted failure of the border agreement process already before Estonia's parliament appended the preamble to the agreement in June, which was formally held as the reason the agreement ran aground. The material published in the beginning of May predicted the matter even before the foreign ministers' preliminary signatures (May 18).

4. Estonians' "crazy demands"

Vladimir Putin's comment, which appeared a little over a week before the signing and started the entire series of articles, was descriptively headed: "Russia does not need the 'crazy demands' of the Baltic countries" (NezG, May 10; RosG, May 11). The heading expresses two views timelessly connected to the enemy: the enemy's aggressiveness and irrationality. Initially and repeatedly thereafter the Baltic countries – in Putin's speech both Estonia and Latvia, whose border agreement negotiations with Russia had already been unsuccessful – were presented in the material published by NezG and RosG as parties that aggressively demanded something from Russia, in this case land areas and/or financial compensations (RosG, May 11; NezG, May 10, May 12). What exactly these demands contained and what they were based on was not explained, nor was even the basis of the Russian government's interpretation of the existence of "demands". As such the comment also followed the typical pattern of propagandistic communication, where details and reasons are intentionally blurred and a simplified set of values is presented (Taylor 2003, pp 3–7; Zur 1991, pp 352, 359). In any case the set of values was clear: according to Russia's interpretation Estonia (and Latvia) was harassing Russia and presenting "crazy" demands.

Calling the Estonians' demands "crazy" or "complete nonsense" (Putin, NezG, May 10; RosG, May 11) or "a farce" (Lavrov, NezG, May 12; RosG, May 12) made the enemy's claimed irrationality directly apparent to the readers. Naturally, the standpoint of Russia's government, which was not directly stated publicly, but which obviously contrasted with the above, correspondingly had to be "rational". As further grounds the writers cited by NezG and RosG made references to how Estonia's demands "did not comply with the spirit of building Europe" or "were not suitable for the 2000s" or "did not fit the model with which Russia fosters its relations with the European Union" (RosG, May 11; NezG, May 12). Thus, the irrationality of the adversary was revealed in many complementary ways: its comments fought against modern understanding and European ways of functioning, which concepts both undoubtedly had a positive echo that emphasized civility among the intended recipients of the message. Here again it was expedient not to explain in what way the "demands" were outdated or violated the way a civilized international community acts.

The third permanent feature clearly brought out by the image conveyed by RosG and NezG right away in May was the presentation of the Estonians as the only threat to the success of the agreement. In case this was not clear to the readers on the basis of the Estonians' "irrationality" and "aggressiveness", to make sure the idea sank in various Russian commentators also stated it clearly. According to Foreign Minister Lavrov, "the Russians' ratification of the agreement depends on how it goes off in Estonia". Thus, Estonia was alone responsible for possible failure: if from here on the Estonians did not act according to the wishes of the Russians, Russia "would

be forced” to refuse to ratify (RosG, May 11; NezG, May 12, May 26). However, there seemed to be no opposite correlation: no possible actions by the Russians appeared to have a similar effect that would free the Estonians from responsibility. Again, this kind of unidirectionality that places the blame on the opponent in all situations is a basic factor of the classical image of the enemy (Zur 1991, pp 356–357).

5. Dishonest Estonians who distort history

The fourth feature that dominated the image since its early phases was the Estonians’ dishonesty and suspicious morals, which also are both typical features of the image of the enemy and characteristic features of propagandistic communication based thereon. The opponent is always on a lower moral level than one’s own group, and the opponent’s promises cannot be trusted (Harle 2000, pp 12–14; Zur 1991, pp 352, 360). One of the features of dishonesty is also the presentation of unfounded claims. According to the material published in RosG and NezG, the Estonians were guilty of dishonesty in two main ways. First the Estonians were said to have broken the promise they gave during the negotiations not to add any preambles or other additional text to the agreement during the ratification phase (RosG, Jun 20, Jun 21, Jun 22; NezG, Jun 20, Jun 27, Jul 6). The Latvian parliament had already earlier done the same thing as the Estonians, which had led to the failure of the border agreement between Latvia and Russia. As seen, Russia’s government predicted a repetition of the same pattern in the case of Estonia and announced beforehand that Russia would not allow it.

When the Estonian parliament placed attachment of exactly the above-mentioned preamble to the agreement as a condition for its own ratification of the agreement, Russia’s reactions were expected: the Estonia’s were said to go against their word. RosG’s and NezG’s material does not, however, concretize which of the Estonian negotiators had given contrary promises or when this had happened; the Estonians themselves denied any promises had been made (Mälksoo 2005, p 145). Nevertheless it suited Russia’s interests and the overall picture presented of the negotiations that the matter was presented in RosG and NezG as an indication of the dishonesty of the Estonians.

Another even more significant side of the Estonians’ claimed dishonesty was the fact that in the disputed preamble the Estonians referred to documents that the Russians considered to include incorrect interpretations of history. Above all Russia denies that the Soviet Union ever occupied Estonia and the other Baltic countries; according to the Russians’ official interpretation the Baltic countries voluntarily joined the Soviet Union in the summer of 1940. For that reason, according to Russia’s interpretation, the references to the continuation of the Estonian state since 1918 and the internationally legal existence of the Tartu peace treaty (1920) were also lies. All the Russian representatives cited in RosG and NezG, as well as the newspaper’s own editors, were completely unanimous about these matters (RosG, Jun 20, Jun 21, Jun 22, Jun 27; NezG, Jun Jun 20, Jun 22, Jun 23). When in rebutting the Estonians’ interpretations it was nevertheless necessary to refer to the terms “occupation” or “annexation”, for example, the material published by RosG and NezG always placed them in quotation marks to emphasize, in addition to other verbal rebuttals, that the newspapers did not consider the terms to be correct.

The question of the status of Estonia as a part of the Soviet Union was clearly at the core of the whole problem, because otherwise one cannot understand why Russia refused to ratify the agreement and used such aggressive rhetoric. Merely “breaking the promise” that Estonians would not connect any proclamations to the agreement can hardly constitute sufficient grounds for repealing the agreement. Furthermore, Estonia insisted that the preamble was not part of the agreement but rather a text explaining the agreement, and that Estonia did not have regional demands towards Russia. Regardless of this insistence, Russia most likely feared the possibility of demands in the future—demands for compensation not only for the shifting of the border, but applying to the occupation period in its entirety. Were Russia to sign any agreement that even hinted at the idea that Estonia and the other Baltic States had been occupied, the signature would have far-reaching consequences. For example, Estonia could demand that the Russians who came to Estonia during the occupation period—and would in this case be illegal colonizers according to international law—return to Russia. In addition, the question could arise about compensation for all material damage and lost lives caused by the Soviet occupation over nearly 50 years.

Several researchers who have earlier studied Estonian-Russian border negotiations have come to similar conclusions about Russia’s motives leading to the rejection of the agreement (Gromilova 2016, pp 52, 57; Levinsson 2006, p 108; Mälksoo 2005, pp 145–149; Viktorova 2006, p 5). The other aspects of the propagandistic rhetoric used by Russia against Estonia in 2005, along with the factors behind it, have in practice not been studied

at all. It can also be surmised that the special position of the memory of World War II in the Russian conception of history functioned as an additional motive. The “Great Patriotic War” and the “victory over fascism” achieved therein are one of the most important forces uniting Russia’s inhabitants and holding the society together. Any questioning of the legal and moral validity of its own measures could destabilize the Russian national identity, this great historical narrative that the government actively employs in order to maintain and strengthen the national spirit. It can be considered that Russia could have vetoed the agreement even if the Estonian government had written explicitly in the preamble that Estonia would never demand any compensation from Russia.

The above-mentioned perspective connects the events of 2005 directly to the dispute of 2007 regarding the so-called Bronze Soldier statue and the subsequent riots and cyber-attacks. The scope of this article is such that it is not possible to discuss the details of the events of 2007. It is noteworthy, however, that the core of the dispute was exactly the same. For Russia, the Bronze Soldier that stood in the center of Estonia’s capital of Tallinn until spring 2007 was a “liberators’ monument” symbolizing Russia’s altruistic liberation of Estonia from the subordination of Nazi Germany. For Estonians, however, the statue was a monument erected by Soviet occupiers, representing a distortion of true history. The statue reminded Estonians of the loss of independence and all the other negative aspects that followed from the Soviet occupation. For this reason, Estonia decided to move the statue from its visible location in the center of the city to the soldiers’ cemetery located at the edge of the city (Liik 2007, pp 73–75).

Russia reacted very strongly to the moving of the statue. In addition to cyber-attacks, the countermeasures initiated by Russia included a wide-ranging propaganda campaign against Estonia, the central themes and rhetoric of which were very similar to those of 2005. The events of 2007 have been studied by several researchers (Ehala 2009, pp 139–158; Liik 2007, pp 71–76; Torsti 2008, pp 19–35), although the connection to the situation of 2005 from the perspective of propaganda has not been discussed in the earlier studies. The most important explaining factor clearly seems to be the “great national narrative” of World War II, in which the Soviet Union/Russia is presented not only as a winner but also as a savior of the rest of the world and as a completely righteous actor. In connection with the border negotiations, the President and Foreign Minister of Russia strongly and preemptively rejected even the most minimal suggestions that this idealized image could be contradictory in any way. The newspapers studied transmitted the message as it was, and supported it with their own material. The centrality of the “national narrative” is especially highlighted by the fact that when it came to this matter, even the opposition newspaper, which is independent of the government, was completely in line with the government and its organ.

In the material published by RosG and NezG the Russian party was not satisfied with merely passively rebutting the Estonians’ viewpoints as they gained publicity. The persons who provided Russian comments on May 19 (NezG), June 29 (RosG) and September 5 (RosG and NezG) filled in the negative image created of the Estonians and the Estonian government by stating that “the Estonians oppressed the country’s Russian minority” and “favored the rise of Nazism in their country”. From the Russian viewpoint, said matters were the heaviest imaginable weapons with which to hit. First of all, oppression of the Russian minority appealed to the Russian readers’ feelings of national solidarity directly grouping them in their minds with the oppressed: after all, here Estonia’s Russians were “one of us”, actually “countrymen”, whose defense and over whose oppression indignation were almost natural obligations. Secondly, depicting the Estonian government as a supporter of Nazism tapped an extremely negative charge from the historical myths with which the Second World War has been treated in the Soviet Union and Russia. In Russia, Nazism is a synonym for absolute evil, which is also understood to have been primarily focused against exactly the Russian people (See, for instance, RosG, Mar 10). Thus, in line with the principles of the classical image of the enemy, linking the Estonians to favoring Nazism functioned as a demonization of the opponent Harle 2000, pp 10–14; Zur 1991, pp 351–363).

6. Conclusions

Overall, the image of the border agreement between Estonia and Russia and its breakdown conveyed by RosG and NezG largely followed the theoretical models for constructing differences between “us” and “others”, or “our own” and “our enemies”. The representative of opposition, NezG cannot be considered an independent actor in this process either, even though the newspaper’s editorial staff was reasonably passive in publishing its own comments. Not one editorial about the topic appeared in RosG or NezG, all the published material appeared in the article and news sections. The main content of the articles consisted of citing the comments of

representatives of the Russian government and publishing them without any post-comments that could be considered critical. The newspapers' conformance with the policies of the Russian government is evidenced by not only the content of the editorial staff's infrequent comments, which accommodated the former, but also the order in which they were published. In all phases of the events the representatives of the Russian government were first allotted print space and only after that did RosG's and NezG's editors publish their comments, if they published them at all.

Publishing the comments of the Estonians in this conjunction did not mean giving the Estonians the last word, instead it illustrated more the perceived hierarchy of publishing, from most important to less important. Namely, most often the comments of Estonian actors were selectively cited so they could be used to support the image of justifying the official Russian stand. For example, the published comments of Arnold Rütel convey the understanding that the new border line would be more sensible than the line specified in the Tartu peace treaty, and that the agreement should be made "on the current basis". In its conjunction the latter could be interpreted in such a way that "the current basis" referred to the agreement without an additional preamble. Another often repeated way of treating the Estonians' comments was to publish them together with a comment by a Russian that directly disproved the Estonians' interpretations (RosG, Jun 17; NezG May 24, Jul 6). The opposite case where the Estonians would have been given an opportunity to comment directly on the Russians' viewpoints within the same article did not appear in RosG or NezG.

In summary it can be said that with its publication policy both RosG and NezG clearly indicated their support of the views of the Russian government, which again were strongly based on defending Russian nationalism, a nationalistic interpretation of history and concrete material interests (territorial conquests). If the matter is examined on an even more principled level, behind it all was the categorical dispute between Estonia and Russia concerning what had happened in the countries' relations in 1940–1991. Since the Estonians' uncompromising premise was to interpret the period as occupation, while the Russians' equally uncompromising premise was to dispute this, the fact that the emergence of the matter was immediately reflected in the image conveyed of the border agreement and its problems can be considered unavoidable. There was no evidence of any re-evaluation of viewpoints in the articles published by RosG or NezG; the newspapers adhered to the stand that has dominated the Russian image since the Second World War. Instead the newspapers followed the theoretical model recognized by the study of images, which steers one to select information that supports and further reinforces prior images. The negative image of the Estonians that even depicted them as enemies, which existed already before the signing of the agreement, proved to be a self-materializing prediction in the newspaper columns during the summer and autumn of 2005.

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