

## DISCOURSE TECHNIQUES FOR CONSTRUCTING SECESSIONS: THE EXPERIENCE OF DONBASS AND LATGALE

**Roman Dodonov**

Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University

ORCID: 0000-0003-1598-499X

**Olena Aleksandrova**

Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University

ORCID: 0000-0003-0030-1367

**Abstract.** *The article is devoted to the analysis of the information strategies of the Russian Federation aimed at the artificial design of secessions. In political philosophy, the term "secession" is used to refer to a region that seeks to leave the current state-territorial system, gain independence or become part of another state entity. The general hypothesis of research is that secession can be constructed by discursive means. The article demonstrates how the media adjusted the socio-political discourse in Ukraine, which led to the splitting of society and the formation of self-proclaimed fake republics in Donbas. The situation in the Donbass is compared with a similar situation in Latgale – the historical region of Latvia with a large share of the Russian-speaking population, where Russia's secession strategies have not been successful.*

**Keywords:** *secession, discourse, media, Russian, Ukraine, Donbas, Latvia, Latgale*

## Introduction

Modern integration and disintegration processes that synchronously unfold in different countries of Europe have attracted the attention of researchers to the phenomenon of secessionism, its laws, including the internal and external factors that give it life, and which regulate the influence and popularity of citizens. The trend of secessionism—a common phenomenon, almost natural, which has existed in all historical times, but which caused the variability and variegated political map of the world.

In the 21st century, political elites mastered the tools of regulating secessionist processes and actively used them to achieve their own geopolitical goals. If the technologies of artificial construction of social and political problems were developed by Russian specialists long ago (Yasaveev 2004), then the discursive potential of constructing secessions remained unrevealed, at least not released to the public. The general hypothesis of our study is that secession can be constructed by discursive artificial means,

According to the authors of this article, the source of induction (from *indūcō* meaning, “I lead”) of separatist movements and the main (though not the only) agent of secession processes in the post-Soviet space is the Kremlin (Russia), which pursues 'neo-imperial' politics. National governments and local communities are at best defensive. Therefore, the focus of the article is on Russia's strategies for constructing secession by discursive methods, which is a conscious limitation of this study.

## Definition of Secessionism

The concept of secessionism (from *secessio*—withdrawal, departure, insurrection and schism) has several meanings, but in the broadest sense, it means “breaking off, separation, and withdrawal of a part from the entity” (Theories of Secession, 1998). In political philosophy, the term “secession” is used to refer to a region that seeks to leave the current state-territorial system, gain independence or become part of another state entity. The most famous examples of secession in the 19th century was the formation of the Confederate States of America (CSA), and in the 20th century, the fall of the world colonial system and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian, Russian, Ottoman, British, and French Empires. In the 21st century, an example of succession would be the withdrawal of Great Britain from the EU (Brexit), if successful.

The instrumental expressions of secessionism are revolution, separatist movements, national liberation struggle, provincial uprisings, civil disobedience campaigns, and even mass emigration. As A. Buchanan notes, these concepts are sometimes used as synonyms, but each of them has its own special meaning. He writes:

“Unlike the revolutionaries, for the separatists, the main goal is not to overthrow the existing government and not the fundamental constitutional, economic and socio-political changes within the existing state. Instead, they want to restrict the jurisdiction of the state in order to withdraw from it their own group and the

territory it occupies... The separatist does not deny the political power of the state as such, but only that power which extends to him and other members of his group, and to the territory they occupy" (Buchanan 2001: 35).

Secessionism is a threat to a stable political order. It is a source of social tension, instability, armed conflict, etc. Despite the fact that modern legal universalism seems to guarantee (but not always practice) the realization by any state of basic human rights, including the rights of minorities, politicians are willing to speculate on regional, confessional, ethnic characteristics in order to fight for their "own" electorate, knowingly or unconsciously supporting secessionist tendencies. In addition, there are cases when secession of a particular community is exploited by external players, bringing it into the area of territorial claims. They construct a rhetorical situation of "incompatibility" of the population of the region and the rest of the state, propelling the centrifugal sentiment.

### **Universal Recipes for the Construction of Secessionism**

It is this case of external influence (without denial of the internal factors) which will be analyzed by the authors using the example of Donbass and Latgale. Comparison of these regions is possible due to the presence of an external subject seeking to initiate secession from the outside. What is meant here is the modern Russian Federation with its neo-imperial plans. Striving to preserve its influence throughout the post-Soviet region and bring back to life its supremacy in Eastern Europe, Russia continually cultivates the discourse of building a "Russian World", "returning to the USSR," etc.

The external information strategy of this state is flexible and selective. Pomerantsev and Weiss have suggested that the influence of Moscow can be thought of concentrically: "in Ukraine it can create complete havoc; in the Baltic states, it can destabilize; in Eastern Europe, co-opt power; in Western Europe, divide and rule; in the US, distract; in the Middle East and South America, fan flames" (Pomerantsev 2017).

To exert pressure on the governments of states that refuse to go along with this political course, the Kremlin uses the same technique: it chooses in the territory of the opponent the region that has historically the largest ethnic, confessional, linguistic differences from the generally homogeneous population in terms of nationality, and in every way "constructs problems," turning it into the center of secessionism.

It must be admitted that Russian propaganda has produced a solid arsenal of instrumental tools aimed at fulfilling this mission. In order to legitimize the described secession strategy, in the historical past, the following techniques were used by Russia. *Finding and replicating information on the smallest violations of human rights and discrimination in the regions of future secession.* Subsequently, the myth of "oppression"—religious, linguistic, and cultural—is built on these facts. Speculations on this subject give the impression of a hopeless situation when the enemy "leaves no choice."

For example, protection of the rights of the Orthodox population of the Balkans became an excuse for the occupation of the Danubian Principalities in 1853. Protection of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine was the reason for the beginning of acts

of a military nature in Crimea and Donbass in 2014. "...Our country," promised Vladimir Putin, "will continue to vigorously defend the rights of Russians, our compatriots abroad, and use for this all the arsenal of available means: from political and economic, to the operations of international law, to the right to self-defense" (Putin's Statement 2014). Thus, the reason for maintaining the secession of the region may be a high proportion of ethnic Russians, the extensive use of the Russian language or Orthodoxy.

*Images of the neighboring people as inferior, underdeveloped, 'retarded' natives, incapable of "history-making" and insignificant in the scale of world culture.* Against this backdrop, all civilizational achievements are associated either directly with Russia or with a region that is intended to be a pro-Russian center. This gives birth to the thesis about the absurdity of the Ukrainian (Belarusian, Latvian, Georgian, etc.) statehood, which is presented as a mistake of history, which needs to be corrected.

*Distortion of information on the economic development of neighboring countries and their regions, the formation of biased judgments and primitive stereotypes, according to the logic of "who feeds whom."* Despite the relatively accessible way of refuting such judgments, stereotypes imposed by the media are a persistent stimulus to mass consciousness and an influential factor in separatism.

*The use of historical memory, from the contents of which facts of injustice are carefully selected, past insults and complaints are actualized, while acts of genocide, deportations, and other crimes committed by imperial authorities are not mentioned.*

*Heavy use of the famous imperial tactic divide and conquer (et impera), when the part of the elite is won over by means of bribes and promises, on behalf of which a demonstrative appeal to Russia is organized with a request to include the region into the empire, "protect", and "save."* Reuniting with Russia appears to be a great blessing for all peoples (while hardly anybody is interested in the real opinion on this subject).

If the separatist side with Russia, the latter created fake organs, simulacra governments, which, as a rule, consist of the Russian nationals with the corresponding ethnic origin. In the 20th century, the creation of "democratic governments" alternative to the legitimate ones, and "peoples republics" was widely used; their function was to present a situation in such a way as if there is not an external aggression but exclusively an internal civil war.

Objects of secession acquired the status of "Russian lands since the beginning of time", which provided for the search of past fragments and centers of Russian culture in this territory (the ancient settlements of the Slavs, trade routes, the activities of emigrants, etc.). The use of this argument turned the simple territorial claims into an act of "restoration of historical justice", a vivid illustration of which is the annexation of the Crimea.

*Blatant falsification of events leading to the escalation of tension, the intensification of secessionary processes and the emergence of a casus belli.* "Woe to the statesman who did not bother to find such a ground for a war that, after the war, would still retain its meaning", this aphorism is attributed to Otto von Bismarck. Just as the beating of Euromaidan students in November 2013 triggered mass disobedience in Kiev, the fire at

the House of Trade Unions in Odessa on May 2, 2014 turned into a rational for mobilization for the pro-Russian forces of the South-East of Ukraine. Today it is known that Russia has experience in organizing similar actions. The Mainila incident of November 26, 1939, when the Finnish side, supposedly, shelled the Soviet border guards, triggering the so-called "Winter" War of 1939–40, was a provocation organized by the Soviet specialist force. As a result, there was an absurd situation where small Finland attacked the giant USSR.

In the arsenal of discursive techniques that justify Russia's interference in the affairs of neighboring states and even the occupation of part of their territories, there is the cultivation of the image of a "surrounded fortress." There is always an enemy who envies the wealth of the Russian mineral resources and dreams of taking control of them, seizing, dismembering, at least, weakening or harming it in any way. Mongol-Tatars, Ottoman Turks, Teutons, Poles, Frenchmen, Englishmen, Germans, Americans, etc. are among Russia's alternating enemy. Confronting their influence becomes a sense of life, and Russia's own expansionist plans look like preventive actions aimed at preventing the implementation of hostile projects: "if we did not send troops to Afghanistan, Americans would have done it," "if we did not join the Crimea, NATO ships would be there." In this sense, any territorial claims can be justified.

In some cases, a *secessionist plan is underpinned by a certain ideological basis*. In this case, Russia implements a program of a sacral, almost religious significance. In the nineteenth century, the Pan-slavist philosopher and naturalist N. Danilevskii had suggested such a program in his work "Russia and Europe" in relation to Constantinople. This sacerdotal program was also proposed by Lev Trotsky in the articles devoted to the world revolution. The seizure of foreign lands turns into a kind of "crusade" or a "sacred war." In a case when foreign territory is captured without a more or less satisfactory reason (South Kuril Islands in Japan, or East Prussia in Germany), another argument is used: it is the right of Russia to receive this territory as, for example, "the award for the victory over fascism in World War II".

According to the latter justification, "the Kaliningrad region is a Russian land that rightfully belongs to our people." In its new quality, it should be turned into a symbol of victory, "the Russian enclave in the center of Europe among the peoples of Western culture," "the strategic outpost of Russia, called to ultimately avert ... "the advance to the East", "the spiritual outpost of Russia in Europe, "which ensures a civilizational dialogue with the West and opposes to Western influence" (Speech by His Holiness 2015).

Today, Russia demonstrates that the experience of constructing secessions obtained over centuries can be strengthened by the possibilities provided by the electronic communications of the 21st century. The authors of the joint research "Russian Social Media Influence. Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe" state that "The Kremlin aims to leverage shared elements of the post-Soviet experience in order to drive wedges between ethnic Russian or Russian speaking populations who reside in these states and their host governments. Farther abroad, the Kremlin attempts to achieve policy paralysis by sowing confusion, stoking fears, and eroding trust in Western and democratic institutions. To conduct these campaigns, Russia experts argue, Russia

employs a synchronized mix of media that varies from attributed TV and news website content to far-right blogs and websites (with unclear attribution), as well as non-attributed social media accounts in the form of bots and trolls” (Todd 2018).

It is clear that the above list of techniques is not exhaustive. It may be supplemented with not a discursive, but quite military, "masking" (Maigre 2015). This is a demonstration of force at the borders through the relocation of troops, large-scale military exercises, "protest actions" of supposedly locals and outright provocations of military without distinctive signs, which came out of nowhere. But even without this it is clear that Russia has a vast experience in distorting facts, shaping public awareness for military plans and manipulation of historical consciousness.

### **The Cases of Donbass and Latgale**

A comparative analysis of discursive influence on the population of Donbass and Latgale, in addition to the above, becomes possible only due to the common Soviet past as part of, respectively, the Ukrainian SSR and the Latvian SSR. Both regions occupied the eastern, border regions of their republics with Russia, and their populations traditionally have had slightly intense ties with Russia than with the central regions of Ukraine and Latvia. Even earlier, during the time of the Russian Empire, these territories (or their parts) belonged to other non-typical territorial entities of Ukrainian and Latvian lands, in particular, to the 'Province of the Don Cossack Host' and to the 'Vitebsk' province.

An important common point is the ethnic composition of the population, since in both cases a significant proportion of Russians has been recorded. Thus, according to the 2001 census, 1,844.4 thousand (38.2%) ethnic Russians were in the Donetsk region, and 991.8 thousand (39.0%) in Luhansk (All-Ukrainian Population Census 2001). According to the 2011 census, 118 thousand Russians (38.9%) were recorded in Latgale (Population and Housing Census 2011). Such indicators make the regions extremely vulnerable in terms of the influence of Russian propaganda.

At the same time, factors that fundamentally distinguish one region from another are that the Donbass on the eve of the conflict was quite industrially developed territory, while Latgale remained an agrarian province, which was second to the Baltic lands of Latvia in economic parameters. Even after Latvia became a member of the European Union, Latgale caused concern precisely because of a significant gap in living standards.

One way or another, but it must be acknowledged that the Russian information policy, aimed at increasing secessionist sentiment, was successful in Ukraine and was not in Latvia. Hybrid military aggression followed by the direct aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine led to the annexation of the Crimea and the formation of two pseudo-state entities in the territories under its control—the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. This means that the secession of the part of the Donbass has already occurred, while Latgale remains a zone of "closer attention" of Russian propaganda.

## Construction of a secession in the Donbass

The name "Donbass" is derived from the abbreviation "Donets Basin" and includes the territory of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine. The Donetsk coal basin also includes the neighboring Dnipropetrovs'k and Kharkiv regions of Ukraine (Western Donbass), and a part of the Rostov region of the Russian Federation (Eastern Donbass). Ukrainian Donbass occupied about 9% of the country's territory, but it was the most urbanized area—in its two regions 20% of all Ukrainian cities were located. Before the war, about 16% of the population of Ukraine lived there (Donbass on fire 2017).

The development of mining industry, primarily coal, as well as metallurgical, chemical, and machine-building industries, has determined the fate of the region. During the Soviet industrialization of the 1930s, representatives of more than a hundred ethnic groups from all over the Soviet Union migrated to the region to build mines and factories. Such an international composition of the population with the domination of the Russian language as a means of communication in no small part led to the commitment to Soviet values.

Ukraine's declaration of independence was accompanied by a devastating economic crisis, which radically changed the lives of Donbass industrial workers. Disrupted economic ties, outdated infrastructure, social, demographic, and environmental problems—all this turned the Donbass of the 1990s into a depressed region and triggered nostalgia for the USSR among its populace. As a result, the population was rather dissatisfied with the actions of the Kiev authorities, and every time during the election, such moods were "propelled" by the politicians who tried to win the partisanship of the electorate opposing the region and the center, the East and the West of the country. The stereotypes of the heroic miner's work, of the unique "Donetsk character," confessional, linguistic, ethnic and cultural tolerance, sincerity and openness of the local population cultivated in every way in the mass consciousness. On the other hand, clientism, patrimonial relations, poor civic engagement and the social infantilism of the masses contributed to the growth of the ambitions of local criminal and oligarchic clans who, in their struggle for power, reached the national level.

In the background of these contradictory tendencies, the factor of external information intervention was crucial for the establishment of secessionary processes. It has been proved today that the hybrid attack on Ukraine by the Russian Federation was prepared in advance (Hybrid War Information Challenges, 2016). Strictly speaking, immediately after the collapse of the USSR, Russia began to express concerns about the status of "compatriots," even though the status of the Russian and Russian-speaking population in Ukraine did not actually change, unlike in the other post-Soviet republics.

The hidden informational influence of Russia manifested itself primarily in the absolute priority given to linguistic and confessional problems, speculation on the topic of economic hardship, accentuating the incompatibility of the values of the West and the East of Ukraine, committed, respectively, to Europe and Russia.

Any negative phenomena in Ukrainian life were presented as expected results of the miscalculations of the actions of the authorities, which, unlike Russian, care not about people, but solely about their own interests. Alongside this, the popularization of the Russian geopolitical project in the form of the concept of "Russian World" was underway. This information contributed to the proliferation of "schismo-genesis", and subsequently blatant separatist sentiments in Ukraine, especially in the Crimea and the Donbass.

After the Orange Revolution of 2004, Moscow realized that it could completely lose its influence on Ukraine, which resulted in more organized, institutional and focused informational pressure. In particular, in 2006, the so-called '18 Center' was created for anti-Ukrainian campaigning in social media within the Federal Security Service (FSB) structure; the "opinion shapers" were actively recruited. These influenced decision-making by experts, parliamentarians, politicians, ministers, and even the president. It was at this time that Russian military science was developing a concept of conducting new wars, in which the ratio of non-military and military measures was 4 to 1.

According to the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, Valeriy Gerasimov, by means of information intervention, even "quite a prosperous state may turn into an arena of fierce armed struggle in a few months and even days, become a victim of foreign intervention, plunge into chaos, humanitarian crisis and a civil war" (Gerasimov 2013). Ukraine has become a training area for this theory's application.

The transition from hidden influence to the blatant information attack of the Russian mass media on Ukraine was Dmitry Kiselyov's program of September 24, 2013 ("engines fail, not all will survive"). This campaign involves central Russian TV channels. Maidan events in the autumn of 2013 accelerated Kremlin's actions of aggression. It is difficult to state unequivocally whether the mass riots were completely inspired by the Russian intelligence services, or that the latter simply took advantage of the situation, but the state of "controlled chaos", which resulted in the paralysis of the military and political leadership and its inability to protect the country from external attack, fully served the interests of the attacker. The methods and techniques of the information warfare of this period were exceptionally diverse. Among them, the following were particularly popular in the pro-Russian media in the Donbass:

- 1) information blockade, non-dissemination or distortion of information about events in Kyiv during the 'Revolution of Dignity'; ideologically-inclined news 'facts', creating the illusion of a complete mess, the destruction of the state apparatus, the spread of myths about the fundamental inability of Ukrainians to have their own state;

- 2) desensitization of the population, that is, lowering of the "sensory threshold" to the scenes of violence, violation of rights and humiliation; as a result, blood and suffering become a common phenomenon; in this way, the population is being psychologically prepared for the perception of the atrocities of war;

- 3) cultivating a sense of danger, demonstrations video (fire, smoke over the city, ruined cars and homes), which prove that the usual way of life is destroyed, there is a need to mobilize, act, protect their lives and those of their loved ones;



4) formation of "injustice and insult" discourse, pitting against the representatives of different minorities, regions, churches; recounting past crimes, historical injustice, appeals to revenge; the Russian-speaking population of Donbass is presented as a "victim of a criminal regime", which needs protection;

5) construction and virtual legitimation of non-existent objects ("people of Donbass", "Novorossiya", "Malorossiya"), deliberate substitution of concepts ("polite people" (fighters with machine guns), "people's governor" (illegitimate usurper);

6) creation of an "image of the enemy", for which the increased emotional tone of the reports was used: post-Maidan Ukrainian authorities were called nothing more than the "junta", "fascists", "banderivtsi" in the Russian media; instead, an informational embargo has been imposed on coverage of internal problems of the Russian Federation and its satellites from the so-called DPR or LPR, using the technology of extracting negative informational symbols from circulation;

7) an appeal to the historical past, mention of the Donetsk – Krivoy Rog Republic of 1918 as an alternative to Ukrainian statehood, stories about prominent Soviet Communist Party figures related to the Donbass (Artyom/Fedor Sergeyev, Nikita Khrushchev, Alexander Zasyadko, etc.);

8) after the annexation of the Crimea—belief in the possibility of implementing the "Crimean scenario" in the Donbass, campaigning for participation in the referendum on "accession to the Russian Federation".

Russian manipulative technologies included the engagement of mediators—political figures, representatives of religious denominations, figures of culture, science, art, athletes, and military, who provided not so much information as their own interpretation of events. They also used the feedback method to induce artificially staged mass actions in support of the procedure for tearing away a part of the territory of Ukraine. Also included were methods of emotional resonance, sensationalism and psychological shock were used to create broad public anti-Ukrainian sentiment; repetition of the same statements was intended to form a single vision of events among the people and was aimed at not ideological attitudes, but everyday awareness of people; popularity was used to justify the aggressive actions of the Russian authorities, motivating it as a demand of society (Hybrid War 2016: 21).

With the onset of armed hostilities in the Donbass, the language of the confrontation has changed into a language of hostility. A prominent feature of propaganda at this stage is an enormous amount of fake news and blatant lies of the Russian media. Suffice it to recall the denial of the presence of Russian troops in the Donbass, the denial to recognize the shooting down of Malaysian "Boeing", Flight MH17, imposing secrecy on the number of losses of Russian soldiers in peacetime, constituted elements of this propaganda.

Today, five years after the start of hostilities, the tone of Russian publications and television broadcasts about Ukraine is more moderate. The peak of tension and aggressiveness has been left behind, because it is impossible to support artificial hysteria endlessly. On the other hand, the index of aggressiveness of Ukrainian media has also

decreased. According to Russian media metrics, in May 2017 it amounted to 3.85 (Nikolaychuk 2017). By comparison, almost the same indicator (3.4) at that time was recorded in Lithuania, which did not go through an armed conflict with Russia, and did not have numerous casualties, destruction and hundreds of thousands of IDPs from the occupied territories of Donbas.

### **The Situation in Latgale**

Latgale is one of the four cultural and historical regions of Latvia, which is enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia. As already noted, it is located in the south-east of the country, with the EU's external border with Russia and Belarus. According to the data of 2013, the Latgale statistical region has 292,674 people. The official center of the region is Daugavpils, but another place is called as "the heart of Latgale"—Rēzekne. The long-term inclusion of the region in the Commonwealth of Poland and the Russian Empire influenced socio-cultural, linguistic and confessional specificities of the local population. If the Baltic lands of Latvia are predominantly Lutheran, in Latgale 65.8% of the people consider themselves Catholics, while 23.8% are Orthodox, including the Russian Orthodox Old Rite ones.

After the collapse of the USSR, Latvia proclaimed itself the legal successor of the Latvian state that existed before the occupation of USSR in 1940. This meant that all residents of the republic did not receive the citizenship of Latvia automatically. Nationalist movements worked toward ensuring that the language and culture associated with the majority of the population dominated the new governments, and they imposed restrictions on the nationalization and demanded that Russian-speakers learn Latvian before they could acquire citizenship. Non-citizens received identity cards that allowed them to work and travel within the EU. When becoming the EU member, Latvia liberalized its civil policy and simplified the rules for obtaining citizenship for the Russian-speaking population. However, only about 60% of Latvian Russians received citizenship by 2015 (Radin 2017).

These circumstances turned Latgale into a potential "risk zone." Researchers of information processes and media traced the presence of the same content elements that were previously cultivated by the Russian mass media in Ukraine giving closer attention to the linguistic issue, as a symbol of the rights of minorities.

It is illustrative to note that in Wikipedia, the article "Latgale" is translated into 41 languages. Only the Russian version contains detailed tables with the results of censuses of the population with a detailed ethnic composition. Only this version contains the section "Latgalian separatism" with reference to the article by Vladimir Linderman "On the Project of the Latgale People's Republic" (Linderman 2015). The English-language version does mention a demonstration for Latgale's reintegration into Russia at the Embassy of Latvia in Moscow in April 2014. But in general, separatist sentiment is not detailed

This gives evidence to the argument that the intensive phase of Russian information interruption campaign is delayed, and there exists only a latent phase, aimed

at "maintaining interest" to the problem. Just as in Ukraine, in the initial (preparatory) stage of aggression, there was a tendentious presentation and arbitrary interpretation of information; the content of historical memory was involved; and an appeal to the values of the Soviet era was carried out. Russia exaggerated the existing problems by organizing various conferences and using the support of PR agencies and tries to create an anti-European image of the Baltic states as violators of basic human rights. Some publicists even referred to the Baltic states as 'neo-fascist entities' (Król 2017).

According to Andrew Wilson, Russian influences in Latvia include media such as the First Baltic Channel, political parties such as the Latvia's Harmony Centre, non-governmental organizations such as "Native Language"—an association promoting the official status of the Russian language in Latvia in 2012 (Wilson, 2015). The Minister of Culture of the Republic of Latvia, Roberts Putnis, commented on this event in his interview:

"In 2012, this general sense of endangerment was significantly increased by the populist promotion of a referendum on Russian as the second official language. 70% of the citizens participated in the referendum, resulting in one of the highest political participation experienced in the history of renewed Latvia. An overwhelming majority, 75%, rejected giving the Russian language official status in Latvia. The authors of the political initiative were the Harmony party, political actors calling themselves social democrats, but in contention with the social democratic tradition, as this party looks out for the interests of only one ethnic minority in Latvia. Despite the burdens of inter-governmental cooperation, these political actors are still working in close cooperation with Russian President Vladimir Putin's nationalist party, United Russia. They have not considered it necessary to review this cooperation after the annexation of Crimea and Russia's incursion into Ukraine in 2014" (Putnis 2016).

Obviously, the fact that Latvia is a member of NATO and the European Union, with which Moscow is not yet willing to enter into an outright conflict, nevertheless plays a part. According to Stephen Blank, Russia uses the somewhat different arsenal of non-military hybrid warfare measures against EU countries. This included: investments in key sectors of European economies; use of Russian investments, trade, and capital to bribe and influence key economic and political elites of Western countries; bribing Western media representatives and supporting anti-integration and pro-Russian political parties; the sale of weapons and military equipment to gain influence over military decision-making in foreign states; large-scale use of intelligence penetration into European organizations; establishing links between Russian organized crime and local criminal elements; establishing ties among religious institutions which use unresolved ethnic tensions and campaigns for minority rights; large-scale supports for Russian information outlets abroad; massive coordinated cyber strikes on selected targets (Blank 2015).

Researchers point out that there were signs of hybrid technology in Latvia. Just as in Ukraine until 2014, there was a strong informational influence on the formation of a local "fifth column" from the Russian-speaking population. According to professor Ainārs Dimants of Riga University, after the conflict in the East of Ukraine began, the Russian-speaking population of Latvia was polarized: 36% supported the policy of Vladimir Putin

to expand the "Russian World," while 20–30% agreed with Latvia within the European Union, and others were undecided (Baltic 2015).

In the same way as in Ukraine, at the initial (preparatory) stage of aggression in Latvia, emphasis was placed on the tendentious presentation and interpretation of information, the involvement of the content of historical memory, and the appeal to the values of the Soviet era, Alexander Król gives specific examples of such manipulations:

1) the struggle for Latvian independence was portrayed by the Russian media not as part of the rightful pursuit of nations to regain their sovereignty, but merely as the result of the intrigues of Western politicians in their scheming against Russia.

For years, the Kremlin used similar tactics against Ukraine, addressing a specially crafted message for the Russian-speaking part of society. By manipulating history, it undermined the achievements of Ukraine's independent statehood and created a vision of exaggerated economic difficulties (Analysis of Russia's 2014);

2) one of the most important aspects of Russian propaganda in the Baltic states was the proliferation of a negative image of the West—the European Union and NATO. Entire series of articles on this subject appeared in Sputnik and Baltnews, while Rubaltic even had separate sections entitled: "Baltic States in NATO" and "Russophobia". These broad subjects are then broken down into smaller narratives, supported by one-sided "analyses" and statements by "experts," often containing transparent lies. These experts usually referred to the political system and economic situation of EU countries, and the main objective was to convince the public that EU and NATO membership did them more harm than good. These manipulations were used to influence public opinion, cause fear and social dissatisfaction;

3) Pro-Russian media also made a sustained effort to manipulate facts about the economic indicators of Latvia in the Soviet period (Annual report 2011). These representations often focused on the economy, for example presenting the region as a "Soviet Silicon Valley", which, in the process of integration with the West, lost its "highly developed" industry (Nosovich 2017). In reality, the post-Soviet industrial plants in question were outdated and without significant technological investment, and would never have been able to compete with the West. After breaking economic ties with their eastern neighbors, many of these companies became useless as they had been an integral part of the Soviet planned economy. Latvia purposefully abandoned some branches of the economy inherited from the USSR, investing in new, more growth-oriented sectors (Król 2017).

Returning to Latgale, one can conclude that the geographical and socio-cultural features of this region, in particular a significant part of the Russian-speaking population, made it a weak link in the system of humanitarian security in Latvia. Just like the Donbass in Ukraine, Latgale in Latvia is very sensitive to the ideology of "Russian World" and is one of the most vulnerable—for Kremlin impact—regions in the country.

## Intensity of Information Flows

In the end, we will touch upon another aspect comparing the secessional trends of the Donbass and Latgale. Despite the ardent strivings of Russian propagandists to construct a new trouble spot using the means of discourse, the effectiveness of their actions directly depends on the willingness of the Russian-speaking population of the post-Soviet countries to identify themselves with Russia. But here sociologists submit contradictory data. If at the end of 2014, Chatham House found that only 11% of Russian-speaking Ukrainians were united with the Russian cultural tradition (Lough 2014), then a year later, The Guardian reported that ethnic Russians in Latvia "are more in favor of Moscow's position in relation to Ukraine than the position of the West" (Luhn 2015).

An indirect indicator of the effectiveness of the influence of Russian propaganda is, in our opinion, the intensity of information flows, but not those artificially "boosted" by technical means by propagandists themselves but rather those which are a sort of response, a demand from the consumer of information. An electronic tool for recording such "feedback" can be the Google Trends service, created to detect thematic popularity on the Internet.

If using this service one compares searches for the keywords "Donbass+Донбасс+Донбас+Donbas" and "Latgale+Латгалия+Latgola" for the last 10 years, then the following picture is obtained:



It clearly demonstrates that the military confrontation in the Donbass has caused a steady media interest, while Latgale's theme remains in the informational "shadow." The chart shows that the query burst of Internet users concerning the Donbass happened during 1) UEFA Euro 2012 (46 queries), 2) in May 2014 (referendum and declaration of the DPR – 79 queries), 3) August 2014 (Ilovaisk 'Kettle' – 100), 4) February 2015 (Debaltseve 'Kettle' – 97 queries) and others. As for Latgale, the query activity is much

less intense and stable with an average of 2 queries. This confirms the initial conclusion that the accession of the Republic of Latvia into the European Union and NATO currently subdues the neo-imperial appetites of the Russian Federation.

## Conclusions

The construction of socio-political problems by means of discursive methods in the modern world emerges as an actual trend, connected not only with ample opportunities of mass communication, but also with technologies such as "color revolutions," which strongly manifests itself is the formation and support of opposition and separatist movements. The aggressive technological impact of the mass media on the mass consciousness is aimed at indoctrinating atypical values and attitudes of this society, the cultivation of centrifugal moods and secessionist sentiment. Some particular success in this area has been achieved by Russia, which uses hybrid attacks to restore its domination in the post-Soviet space.

Mass media, and in particular, the television, propagate the idea of unity of the population from the region of intended secession with Russia, and through these means, the virus of separatism is injected. At the same time, while Moscow is not going to actually include the region in the Russian Federation, it is enough for Russia that the "foreign element" incorporated in the body of a neighboring state will slow down the state's development for a long time. And this at least will make it more manageable and obedient. These were the cases in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and in the East of Ukraine. Two World Forums of Separatist Movements that took place in Moscow in 2015 and 2016 show that secessionism is a coordinated "discursive weapon" in the arsenal of Russian international politics, a tool of semi-hidden pressure and blackmail.

Russia's annexation of the Crimea and the military support of the self-proclaimed 'DPR' and 'LPR' brought these political technologies out of the shadows, turning them into everyday practices. In particular, in the Donbass, Moscow managed not only to construct an anti-Ukrainian environment, and to stir a mass dissatisfaction with the central government, but also to persuade the people to hold a referendum demanding the accession of the region to the Russian Federation. The Russian propaganda fulfilled all the tasks foreseen by the concept of the latest (hybrid) wars. This propaganda caused disorder in the enemy's camp, fostered the mobilization and the consolidation of anti-state forces, created an illusion of implementation of the "Crimean scenario" in the Donbass, and eventually legitimized the existence of fake state entities under the Russian control.

Latvia, in view of its history and geopolitical situation, also faces hybrid informational influence, albeit in other manifestations and modifications. The construction of a potential trouble spot of secessionism in this country is associated with Latgale, but these actions can hardly be considered successful.

Under these conditions, the priority tasks of the national media policy both in Ukraine and in Latvia are the informational confrontation with external aggressive influence, as well as ensuring the stability and reliability of its own media environment.

Independent media play a decisive role in ensuring the humanitarian security in both states. Their strategic goal as the media is not only to preserve the social space, but also to give impetus to the advance of culture and spirituality, the spread of democratic values, the strengthening of national languages, and ensuring stability in the social and political environment.

The prospect of further research is to study the responses of national governments and local communities to external discursive challenges as well as to analyze strategies for overcoming separatist tendencies.

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