



National Defense Academy of Latvia
Centre for Security and Strategic Research

Trust in the Latvian National Armed Forces among Russian-speakers in Latvia



Ieva Bērziņa, Senior researcher
Centre for Security and Strategic Research
Research report No. 01/22
June / 2022

Trust in the Latvian National Armed Forces among Russian-speakers in Latvia

- Dr. sc. pol. Ieva Bērziņa

An essential prerequisite for effective security policy is trust in the military as it is one of the critical factors affecting society's will to defend its country. This paper analyses the lower trust among Latvia's Russian-speakers in the Latvian National Armed Forces when compared to people whose mother tongue is Latvian. The main conclusion of the paper is that Russian-speakers' trust in the Latvian National Armed Forces can be reduced to a specific range of factors: a lack of sufficient information about the Latvian army; the strong and positive image of the Russian Armed Forces; the influence of Kremlin-controlled media content on the perception of Latvia's overall security policy as a small country.

Keywords: Latvia; Latvian Russian-speaking community; the Latvian National Armed Forces; the Russian Armed Forces; media and military; mediatization; trust in the armed forces

The media and the military

The issue of trust in the military will be analysed in the context of the increasing role of the media in various aspects of social life, which is described as mediatization in the theoretical literature (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Schulz, 2004; Hjarvard, 2008; Strömbäck, 2008, 2016). The basic idea of mediatization is that the media are not only the intermediaries between the audience and the communicator, but that they form the very environment in which communication takes place. Thus, media logic penetrates the social and political processes that they represent. The military is no exception; therefore, the concept of mediatization has also been applied to warfare (Hiebert, 1991; McQuail, 2006; Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2010, 2015; Horten, 2011; Maltby, 2012; Crosbie, 2015).

Hoskins & O'Loughlin (2010: 4) see the mediatization of war in the following terms: "media are becoming part of warfare practices to the point that the conduct of war cannot be understood unless one carefully accounts for the role of media in it." They define military mediatization as "the process by which

warfare is increasingly embedded in and penetrated by media, such that to plan, wage, legitimize, assuage, historicize, remember, and to imagine war requires attention to that media and its uses" (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2015: 1323). Likewise, Maltby (2012: 260) describes the process of military mediatization in a way that army communication with internal and political audiences is "organized around and through media." Hiebert (1991: 109) does not use the term "mediatization". Nevertheless, the way in which he describes the First Gulf War as "a media event" corresponds to the concept because he explains how mass communication was used as an integral part of warfare. Finally, Horten (2011: 31-32) argues that warfare has become increasingly mediatized since the Vietnam War, and claims that the media are the "Fourth Branch" of military operations by analogy to the media as the "Fourth Estate" of politics.

The concept of military mediatization explains the enormous role of the media in relations between the military and society. Therefore, Russian-speakers' trust in the Latvian National Armed Forces is analysed through the prism of the media environment. Trust in the armed forces is a matter of perception, which is largely being shaped through the media. The concept of military mediatization developed primarily in the context of warfare. Nevertheless, it may also be applied to the peacetime relations between the army and society, because the media is the primary source of information for the public about the military. The media also shapes the perception of the overall security context in which the armed forces operate. Corner & Parry (2017) identify several, but not exhaustive overlapping themes characterizing media and military relations in different cultural contexts: the military-entertainment complex; imaging and sharing technologies; war and the body of those affected by the war; the personalization of soldiers and veterans. This is indicative of how challenging the diverse mass communication environment is for the management of the army's public image.

The 2019 study about the willingness of Latvian

society to defend the state found a polarization of views on trust in the Latvian National Armed Forces – it was trusted by 78 % of respondents using the Latvian language at home, whereas only 34 % of Russian-speakers trusted this institution (Berzina & Zupa, 2019: 13). This has been identified as a research problem for this study, which aims to answer the question: What factors negatively influence the trust in the Latvian National Armed Forces among Latvian Russian-speakers? With respect to the research question, three assumptions related to the peculiarities of the Latvian information environment were formulated and explored. This is because 96 % of Russian-speakers in Latvia obtain information about events in Latvia and the world in the Russian language, and only 44 % of this audience consumes media information in Latvian, as well (Berzina & Zupa, 2019: 21). The Russian language media content available to the Latvian population consists of Latvian media in Russian, Russia's media, and Russian media from other countries such as Ukraine, the US, the United Kingdom and others.

A long-term feature of the Latvian information space has been that approximately 20% of TV viewing time has consisted of channels retransmitting content from the three largest Russian federal TV channels (Berzina, 2018), which was also the case at the time when the study was conducted! Therefore, a specific difficulty in shaping the image of the Latvian National Armed Forces within the Russian-speaking community in Latvia has been that the Latvian information environment consists of media content from different media systems, linked to a specific political regime (Siebert, Peterson, Schramm, 1956/1963). According to the Democracy Index 2020 (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020) Latvia is a "flawed democracy," whereas Russia is an "authoritarian regime." As Latvia is a democratic country, the media may be critical of the government, public administration, and force structures, including the army to a more significant extent, whereas the media in Russia are under the control of the government to a considerably larger extent. Guriev & Treisman (2020: 1) classify Russia's political regime as "informational autocracy," which is based on information control and the manipulation of public opinion "with the help of censored or co-opted media." The armed forces are an essential building

block of the Russian political regime; therefore, Russian federal TV channels are also used to construct a positive image about the Russian army.

The extensive consumption by Latvian Russian-speakers of media content in the Russian language, especially from Kremlin-controlled media, encouraged the formulation of three assumptions, which were tested empirically. Firstly, the Official Language Law (2000) stipulates that state communication with the public must take place only in Latvian. Therefore, one of the possible explanations for the research problem is that the public, which uses only the Russian language information space, receives less information about the Latvian National Armed Forces than the public which uses Latvian language information sources. Secondly, according to the Latvian State Security Service (2020: 26), the Russian media under the Kremlin's control aims "to improve Russia's image and provide support in discrediting other countries, including Latvia." It may, therefore, be assumed that the Russian media contain negative information about the Latvian army. Thirdly, the Kremlin controlled media disseminate information about the Russian Armed Forces, the military capabilities of which exceed the military capabilities of Latvia as a small country many times. It may be assumed that the perception of the asymmetry of military power affects the image of the Latvian army within the Russian speaking audience negatively.

Overall, the image of the Latvian army in the Russian-speaking audience is being shaped in complicated circumstances. On the one hand, Russia's military activities have been identified as one of the threats to Latvia's security (National Security Concept, 2019), and the prevention of this threat is the task of the Latvian army. However, on the other hand, information about the Russian Army which is addressed to the internal Russian audience is available in the Latvian information space. The study, therefore, offers an in-depth insight into how this contradictory situation is shaping the views of the Russian-speaking audience in Latvia.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach and focuses on the opinions of Russian-speakers in Latvia because the link between media content and the formation of

1 *Latvia is gradually restricting the availability of Russian TV channels, making the measurement of the Latvian media landscape more dynamic and challenging. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the banned TV channels' former audiences are accessing this media content in other ways, such as via the internet.*

public opinion is complex. As noted by McQuail (2006: 115), “the hidden complexities that lie between these two measures have vitiated any clear conclusion about the direction and strength of influence on public opinion”. The focus of the research is “the end-state,” or the views and attitudes of Russian-speakers in Latvia towards the Latvian National Armed Forces; therefore, a decision was made to use the focus group method for exploring the formulated assumptions in the context of the respondents’ media consumption habits. This method was selected because it is “a particularly good choice of method when the purpose of the research is to elicit people’s understandings, opinions and views, or to explore how these are advanced, elaborated and negotiated in a social context” (Wilkinson, 1998: 187).

Focus group discussions with Russian-speakers in Latvia were conducted in September 2020 in Riga and Daugavpils, the two cities containing Latvia’s most significant Russian-speaking population. Three focus group discussions were organized into three age groups in each city: 18-20 years, 35 - 45 years, and 60+ years. A total of six focus groups were set up with 47 participants. Focus group discussions were implemented in cooperation with the SKDS research centre. The focus group discussions revealed the participants’ perceptions of the Latvian National Armed Forces and the Russian Armed Forces, their sources of information about the military, and considerations as to why they trust or distrust the Latvian National Armed forces. Focus group transcripts were analysed using a qualitative text analysis approach (Kuckartz, 2014) with the MAXQDA qualitative and mixed methods research software. The information obtained in the focus group discussions cannot be generalized; nevertheless, it provides insight into factors that reduce trust in the Latvian army within the Russian-speaking audience. The data obtained in the study may be used to formulate hypotheses for a quantitative study.

Results

The focus group discussions were organized in such a way as to test assumptions that trust in the Latvian National Armed Forces within the Russian speaking audience was being reduced by a lack of information; the defamatory information; or the asymmetry of the Latvian military force when compared with the Russian Armed Forces. The guidelines for the focus group discussions were formulated to gain an in-

depth understanding of what it is that determines the formation of respondents’ opinions. The information provided by the focus group participants was grouped in thematic categories, which made it possible to analyse large volumes of unstructured text. The three general categories: perception of the Latvian and Russian armies and trust in the Latvian National Armed Forces, were divided into thematic sub-categories that provide a perspective on the spectrum of views related to the research question.

Perception of the Latvian National Armed Forces

The views on the Latvian army of focus group participants were dominated by a lack of information and negative perceptions related to the assessment of the combat capabilities of Latvia as a small country with its limited military manpower and ability to purchase modern armaments when compared to Russia as a great power. The image of the Latvian army was also linked to threat perception and Latvia’s NATO membership. Some respondents evaluated the Latvian National Armed forces as an employer.

The army of Latvia, as a small country

In general, respondents pointed to a lack of information about the Latvian National Armed forces, which made some of them claim that Latvia had no armed forces at all, as a matter of fact. However, this was not a lack of knowledge about the existence of the Latvian army, but an exaggeration of the insufficiency of the information, and the comparison of a small country’s army with their memories of the Soviet army and the perception of the Russian army. The impression that Latvia had no army at all was a mixture of several considerations: the army was not visible, and was not associated with anything; there was no compulsory military service; the Latvian army was small compared to the Russian army; Latvia joined the EU and NATO; thus, the state does not have its own armed forces (Daugavpils, 35 – 45; Riga, 35 – 45). The words of a pensioner from Riga were illustrative of the view that a small army is not perceived as a significant military force in principle:

In Soviet times, the army was an army. How many military units were there in Latvia? However, now only one small and that is all. Moreover, even then, there are more Americans than ours. Once upon a time, there was

an armed force, but now it is just a name. Once a soldier looked like a soldier, but now one cannot distinguish a soldier from a fisherman (Riga, 65+).

The quote above also implied that a state should have its own army, and the presence of NATO partners meant that Latvia did not have an army.² At the same time, several respondents emphasized that Latvia, as a small country, did not need an army at all. According to this opinion, the army was only necessary for guarding its border, and emergencies and the respondents mentioned Switzerland as an example, which in their view, was doing great without a standing army³(Riga, 65+; Riga, 18 – 20, Daugavpils, 65+). Furthermore, some respondents emphasized the asymmetry with Russia's military capabilities which led to the belief that resistance in a military conflict was impossible; therefore, having an army in a small country was useless (Riga, 65+). Thus, the views about the Latvian army were formed by the concept of asymmetry of military force between Latvia and Russia and a perception about Latvia's limited opportunities for influencing international politics as a small country.

Threat perception

The view that Latvia does not need armed forces was closely related to the view that Latvia has no military threats; therefore, it is unnecessary to invest financial resources in defence. The data obtained in the focus group discussions provided an in-depth understanding of the polarization of views found in the quantitative study on the question of whether the policy pursued by Russia was threatening to Latvian society. Only 15 % of Russian-speaking respondents considered Russia's policy to be a threat as opposed to 60 % of respondents with the Latvian language spoken in the family (Berzina & Zupa, 2019: 26). The participants in the focus group discussion were convinced that the Kremlin was not planning to occupy the Baltic states because they believed that Russia was a peaceful country that had always been attacked by others; it did not need Latvia unless it

provoked Russia; Russia has its problems; Russia is not able to occupy Latvia⁴ (Riga, 18 – 20; Riga, 35 – 45; Riga, 65+; Daugavpils, 18 – 20; Daugavpils, 35 – 45; Daugavpils, 65+). The opinion expressed in the Daugavpils youth group gave evidence of how the narrative of Russia as a peaceful country promoted by the Kremlin's controlled media (Teperik, 2020) was rooted in the perception of Russian-speakers in Latvia:

Russia stands for peace; it helps all the time. It tries to resolve some conflicts; it is not in Russia's interest to start a war. [...] Russia only exists; it does not want any war. What is the point? They are preparing because they see NATO pressure, and they have no choice but to prepare for their attack(Daugavpils, 18 – 20).

As to the perception of threat, focus group participants' understanding of regional and global security primarily reflected the worldview promoted by the Kremlin. By positioning itself as a peaceful state, Russia reduced support for the development of Latvia's defence sector among Russian-speakers in Latvia.

Armament of the Latvian army

The perception of military capabilities was the third aspect forming the image of the Latvian army among the Russian-speaking audience. Participants in the focus groups strongly believed that Latvia bought worn-out and, therefore, inefficient military equipment for the army⁵ (Riga, 35 – 45; Riga, 65+; Riga, 18 – 20; Daugavpils, 35 – 45; Daugavpils, 65+). In the respondents' view, Latvia was wasting considerable financial resources for this purpose (Daugavpils, 35 – 45). Military parades were one of the essential sources of information about the military capabilities of the Latvian army for Russian-speakers. Unfortunately, the parades have not convinced the respondents about the effectiveness of the combat capabilities of the Latvian army (Daugavpils, 18 – 20), which reinforced the view that Latvia did not need an army:

I immediately imagined Latvia's military parade; it was very funny when I saw it on the internet. [...] I do not

² This view indicated a lack of understanding that Latvia is an equal member of NATO.

³ The respondents were unaware of Switzerland's comprehensive defence concept based on the citizen-soldier principle, meaning it was a militarily prepared society

⁴ Russia's attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022 indicates how erroneous the respondents' views are.

⁵ It was not clear to the respondents how small states obtained value for money in military technologies and how the military equipment purchased by Latvia could be used in the defence of a small country.

understand why an army is needed here at all. If Russia attacks us, the army will not save us (Daugavpils, 35 – 45).

Another respondent mentioned that he read information in the media about the equipment purchased by the Latvian army. In his view, it was the same equipment that he learned when he was on duty about 50 years ago to identify a potential adversary. The respondent emphasized that it was not a new weapon even then (Daugavpils, 65+). According to some of the research participants, Latvia is buying used military equipment, because NATO and the US want to get rid of unnecessary equipment (Daugavpils, 65+; Riga, 35 – 45). The latter idea stems from the belief that Latvia has a subordinate role due to the fact that it is a small state within the alliance.

Latvia's NATO membership

The image of the Latvian army is also strongly associated with NATO. Nevertheless, among focus group participants, it had mainly negative associations based on various arguments: NATO allies are mercenaries who will not defend Latvia in the event of a military conflict because it is not their homeland (Riga, 35 – 45; Riga, 65+); the defence spending of 2% of GDP should be used to build Latvia's army instead of collective defence (Riga, 35 – 45); the international contingent is more visible than the Latvian army (Riga, 35 – 45); soldiers from other countries coming to Latvia are aged 50 – 60 which limits the physical capabilities necessary for their service in the army (Riga, 35 – 45); allied soldiers have no discipline (Riga, 65+; Daugavpils, 65+); the NATO presence in Latvia is increasing international tension (Daugavpils, 65+)⁶. The views expressed by focus group participants indicated that they are, indeed, more informed about NATO than the Latvian army, and their views correspond essentially to the negative anti-NATO narratives disseminated in the Russian language media in Poland and the Baltic States (DFRLab, 2018). It should be noted that there were less critical views about both NATO and the Latvian

army among youth groups, which can be explained by their different media consumption, as they obtain information mainly on the internet.

The army as an employer

The fourth element that characterized the image of the Latvian army in focus groups was related to the army as a workplace. The army, as an employer, was a positive aspect because respondents were convinced that the army provided reasonable remuneration and social guarantees (Daugavpils, 65+; Riga, 65+; Riga, 35 – 45). The respondents from youth groups had the impression that the army prepares people physically, teaching them to dress and eat quickly, which was evaluated positively (Riga, 18 – 20; Daugavpils, 18 – 20). In addition, they knew that the Latvian army is actively recruiting, pays well, is an excellent place to study, provides a guaranteed job, and takes everybody (Daugavpils, 18 – 20). One of the respondents from a youth group recalled a visit to the school by representatives from the Latvian army as an exciting event (Riga, 18 – 20). Another young man has an acquaintance who is a few years older and serves in the army, has been to Afghanistan and stated that the army has instilled more restraint, directness and purposefulness in him (Riga, 18 – 20).

On the other hand, two focus group participants mentioned examples about which they knew personally when service in the Latvian army or studies at the National Defence Academy of Latvia had been too hard to endure, and the personnel left quickly (Riga, 35 – 45; Daugavpils, 65+). There were also opinions indicating that the remuneration of professional soldiers and national guard members was an inefficient use of taxpayers' money (Daugavpils, 35 – 45), and this opinion can be understood in the context of the ideas explained above. However, in general, the image of the Latvian army as an employer was positive, and had largely been built up because of the direct interaction between the army and society, through word-of-mouth, and civil-military activities.

6 *Most of these views reflect misleading information – the forces of NATO allies stationed in Latvia are a combat-ready part of the regular armies of NATO member-states. Moreover, Latvia's defence budget is being spent on developing the Latvian army. The exceptional cases involving violations of ethical or legal norms by NATO soldiers are not an indicator of a lack of overall discipline.*

Perception of the Russian Armed Forces

When asked about the Russian army, the respondents' views were generally positive because they were more informed about it than about the Latvian army. The positive attitude had been formed by the military strength and might of Russia as a large country and the belief that Russia's behaviour in international politics was peaceful.

Greatness and strength

In the view of the focus group participants, the image of the Russian army was primarily related to greatness and strength (Riga, 35 – 45; Daugavpils, 35 – 45; Daugavpils, 65+; Daugavpils, 18 – 20). It is viewed to be a mighty army of great power in confrontation with NATO (Riga, 65+). The strength of the Russian army, for example, was seen in the Syrian conflict, where, according to a focus group member, Russia had achieved good results, unlike the other regional powers involved in the conflict (Riga, 65+). For some respondents, the greatness of the Russian army was also associated with the image of the President of the Russian Federation V. Putin and the Russian Minister of Defence S. Shoigu (Riga, 65+). They also pointed out the growth of the Russian army over the last 20 years compared to the state of the army under the President of the Russian Federation B. Yeltsin (Riga, 65+).

In contrast to Latvia's military parades, the parades of the Russian Armed Forces had convinced respondents of its strength, and some even admitted that this was why they would feel safer in Russia than in Latvia (Riga, 65+; Riga, 18 – 20). Therefore, Russia was assessed as an opponent that was too strong compared to Latvia which will always be zero, no matter how well the Latvian army is prepared (Riga, 65+; Daugavpils, 35 – 45; Daugavpils, 65+; Daugavpils, 18 – 20). This was also reinforced by the impression of the superiority of the armament in comparison with the Latvian army (Riga, 18 – 20; Daugavpils, 35 – 45). Many focus group participants were informed about the production of weapons, including nuclear, in Russia's military-industrial complex, the exhibition of weapons, and the arms trade (Riga, 35 – 45; Daugavpils, 18 – 20). The respondents concluded that Russia has defence and attack weapons; therefore, its

army engenders greater trust (Riga, 65+). According to the respondents, the army's strength was also enhanced by compulsory military service and the fact that the Russian army does not rely on any alliances (Rīga, 18 – 20; Daugavpils, 18 – 20; Daugavpils, 35 – 45).

These views were collected before Russia had invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, a blitzkrieg which failed, turning into prolonged warfare with limited tactical and operational gains and, most likely strategic and long-term losses for Russia. Thus, it remains to be seen how the results of Russia's war against Ukraine will affect the perception of the Russian army among Latvia's Russian-speakers.

Russia as a peaceful country

Perceptions of the Russian army also revealed the respondents' belief that Russia is a peaceful state. Some focus group members see the Russian army as a peaceful army because *it does not conduct any exercises off the coast of America and does not intervene in [internal matters] of other countries if there are no significant conflicts* (Riga, 65+). In this context, the opinion was also expressed that Russia would have conquered Latvia a long time ago if it wanted to, but *it is clear to us that Russia will never violently seize us* (Riga, 65+). The focus groups also expressed that Russia had never attacked anyone, but if someone has attacked it, Russia has always won (Riga, 65+). The influence of the Kremlin-promoted narratives can also be seen in the view that all instability in the world is caused by the United States and NATO (Riga, 65+). The information obtained in the focus groups shows that views of the Russian-speaking audience in Latvia are influenced by the perspective of international politics promoted by Russia (Marnot & Juurvee, 2020).

Availability of information

Most focus group participants admitted that they have much more information about the Russian army than the Latvian army, which is clearly illustrated by this quote:

Many will now speak positively about the Russian and Soviet armies because there is political agitation. Every day on the television, on every channel, one can see either an exhibition of military equipment, a parade, or something else. As a result, a much higher percentage of

people may be interested in the Russian army than the Latvian army (Riga, 35 – 45).

The more widely available information about the Russian army is one factor shaping the impression of its greatness and strength, unlike the Latvian army, which some respondents claim not to have seen at all (Riga, 35 – 45; Daugavpils, 65+). Focus group participants said that they obtain information about the Russian army on television, on the internet, in magazines, and books, as well as from personal contacts in Russia (Riga, 35 – 45; Daugavpils, 35 – 45, Daugavpils, 65+). One of the crucial sources of information about the Russian army is the May 9 parade and serials about the Russian army (Riga, 18 – 20; Daugavpils, 35 – 45).

The young people also emphasized that they have more information about the Russian army than the Latvian army. They explained that they are more informed about the Russian army because, as Russian speakers, they are more interested in information in Russian (Riga, 18 – 20). The comment from the youth group illustrates how much information about the Russian army is available in the Russian-language information environment:

When I come home, my grandmother always has news [on the television], and it always tells something about the army (Riga, 18 – 20).⁷

Other young people also admitted that they do not watch the news but obtain information about the Russian army from other family members (Riga, 18 – 20). At the same time, there are also critical views about the Russian army in youth focus groups. One of them related to the quality of armaments, because there was information on the internet that most Russian armaments are outdated (Riga, 18 – 20). Negative perceptions were also related to compulsory military service because it was associated with incompetence, violence, and the restriction of individual freedom (Riga, 18 – 20, Daugavpils, 18 – 20). The Russian army was also associated with the violence within its ranks for a member of the middle-generation focus group (Riga, 35 – 45). Critical perceptions of the Russian army

were determined very much by media consumption, as young people obtained more information online from various individual social media users, bloggers or foreign media. In these media, there is information available that differs from the image of the Russian army constructed in the Kremlin's controlled media because people share their own experiences and ridicule the Russian army (Riga, 18 – 20).

Trust in the Latvian National Armed Forces

Focus group participants were asked if they trusted the Latvian army. Their answers regarding trust were closely related to the perception of the Latvian National Armed Forces, as described above. The most critical aspect that reduced trust in the Latvian army was the insufficiency of information, because the object of the trust needs to be known about, but the army is not visible to the Russian-speaking audience (Riga, 35 – 45; Riga, 65+; Daugavpils, 35 – 45). In connection with the lack of information, a focus group participant said that he had not experienced any situation where it could be ascertained whether the Latvian army could be trusted or not (Daugavpils, 18 – 20), which indicated a relatively limited picture of the Latvian army. It should also be emphasized that the participants of the study indicated that they wanted to receive more information about the Latvian army, because they wanted to know more about the country in which they live, that it was exciting, and one need to know what to do in case of military attack (Riga, 35 – 45; Daugavpils, 35 – 45). Furthermore, the respondents said that they wanted to know what the tasks of the Latvian army were, what the defence budget of Latvia was and how it was being used and how military procurement took place (Riga, 65+; Daugavpils, 35 – 45).

The second aspect that determined trust in the armed forces was the perception of its combat capabilities. In the case of the Latvian army, respondents differentiated situations where

7 *The Latvian National Electronic Mass Media Council banned the distribution of many Russian television channels in Latvia and various Russian-related websites that disseminated information relevant to Russia's political and military goals in the wake of Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022. How the limits imposed on Russian media in the Latvian information environment will affect the views of Latvian Russian-speakers remains a question to be answered in the long term.*

they trusted it or did not trust it. Distrust was more pronounced in military conflict, but one could trust the army in crises (Riga, 35 – 45; Daugavpils, 65+), although there were opinions that the army would not help in crises either (Daugavpils, 35 – 45). Some emphasized that they trusted the State Fire and Rescue Service more than the army in crises, because they knew where to call and were convinced that this institution would help (Riga, 35 – 45). The critical assessment of the combat capabilities of the Latvian army was related to the fact that Latvia is a small country; therefore, it has a small army, a small number of soldiers, and insufficient armaments (Riga, 18 – 20; Daugavpils, 65+). Consequently, there was disbelief in several groups about whether the army would defend the country if a crisis or military conflict were to happen (Riga, 18 – 20; Rīga, 65+; Daugavpils, 65+).

Latvia's NATO membership was the third element shaping trust in the Latvian army. Among the youth groups, there was a more pronounced opinion that Latvia's membership in the NATO alliance *created a feeling that everything was in order* (Riga, 18 – 20). However, there was also the opposite opinion, that the Latvian army could not be trusted because some respondents were convinced that *in the event of a military attack, it would not defend Latvia, but those under whose authority Latvia is, namely the United States and NATO* (Daugavpils, 18 – 20). In this connection, reference was made to information in the media, where it had been stated that NATO would not protect us, will not be able to do anything, and will not save Latvian society at all (Daugavpils, 35 – 45). These views provided evidence about the respondents' lack of knowledge of international security policy and the principle of collective defence. At the same time, not all opinions were negative. There were people in several groups who trusted the Latvian army (Riga, 18 – 20; Riga, 65+; Daugavpils, 18 – 20).

Conclusions

The information obtained in the focus groups provided an opportunity for testing the formulated assumptions and answering the research question. The lack of information about the Latvian Armed Forces was the main reason why respondents expressed distrust in this organization. The secondary quantitative research data and the information

obtained in this study showed that the Russian-speaking audience obtained information mainly through the Russian-language information space. Therefore, information about the Latvian army should be more widely available in the Russian-language information space to increase trust in the Latvian National Armed Forces within Latvia's Russian-speaking audience.

The second factor that decreased trust in the Latvian army was the widely available information about the Russian Armed Forces. Most focus group participants admitted that they received a lot of positive information about the Russian army. As trust in the armed forces was largely determined by the perception of their military capabilities, the military potential of the Russian army as a large state was compared to the Latvian army as a small state. The asymmetry in military potential determined that the assessment of Latvia's military capabilities in the Russian-speaking audience was negative. It should be emphasized that respondents obtained information about the Russian army primarily from Kremlin-controlled TV channels, where a positive and strong image of this organization was purposefully created.

The assumption that trust in the Latvian army was decreased by the negative information in the Russian language information environment can only be partially confirmed, as the most crucial problem is the lack of information, including damaging information. The influence of the Kremlin-controlled media, in terms of spreading negative information, could be seen in the context of NATO, about which Russia promoted long-term negative narratives. As Latvia is a member of NATO, the negative image of NATO in the Russian language media affects the image of the Latvian army negatively to some degree. However, these adverse effects could be mitigated through more information about the Latvian army and closer civil-military relations with the Russian-speaking audience. The information obtained in the focus groups also showed the potential for building stronger relations between the Latvian army and Russian-speakers.

Overall, the information obtained in the focus groups was not complimentary to the Latvian National Armed Forces; nevertheless, this is a result of the specific circumstances of Latvia – a small state having a potential adversary with a vast military force; a relatively high proportion of its population

being Russian-speaking; and the long-term presence of content from Russia's federal TV channels in the Latvian information environment. Low trust in the Latvian army was also linked to a lack of knowledge and understanding of Latvia's defence and security policy among Russian-speakers. It was not clear to respondents how small states could resist or deter a potential aggressor with a significantly greater military force, nor how military equipment available to the Latvian army could be used for this purpose.

However, it is possible that the diminishing of Russia's status in the international system, which will potentially be brought about by its initiated war in Ukraine, will change the views of Latvia's Russian-speaking population about its army, in favour of the Latvian army. Furthermore, it is also possible that the structure of Latvia's information space will change due to the global changes brought by Russia's war in Ukraine, which will possibly increase the role of the media in the Latvian language for Latvia's Russian-speakers. Nevertheless, it is still too early to draw conclusions and make predictions.

At the same time, there is currently already potential for increased trust in the Latvian Armed Forces, because most focus group participants said that they would like to receive more specific information about the Latvian army and an explanation of how Latvia's armed forces are formed and what they do. Moreover, the personal experience of some focus group members in their dealings with the Latvian army and NATO soldiers showed that targeted and positive civil-military relations campaigns can effectively counter the Kremlin-promoted narratives and create a positive image of the Latvian army and NATO in Russian-speaking audiences, especially within the younger generation.

List of references

Berzina, I. & Zupa, U. (2019). *Latvijas sabiedrības griba aizstāvēt valsti: veicinošie un kavējošie faktori [The will of Latvian society to defend the state: Facilitating and disincentive factors]*. National Defence Academy of Latvia, Center for Security and Strategic Research. Retrieved from https://www.naa.mil.lv/sites/naa/files/document/DSPC_GribaAizstavetValsti_0.pdf

Berzina I. (2018). Political Trust and Russian Media in Latvia. *Journal on Baltic Security*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1-8.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2478/jobs-2018-0008>

Corner, J., & Parry, K. (2017). The media and the military: editorial. *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 3-10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443716673897>

Crosbie, T. (2015). Scandal and military mediatization. *Media, War & Conflict*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 100–119. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635214531108>

DFRLab. (2018). #BalticBrief: Enhanced Anti-NATO Narratives Target Enhanced Forward Presence. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/dfrlab/balticbrief-enhanced-anti-nato-narratives-target-enhanced-forward-presence-fff2272a8992>

The Economist Intelligence Unit. (2020). Democracy Index 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/>

Guriev, S. & Treisman, D. (2020). A Theory of Informational Autocracy. *Journal of Public Economics*, Vol. 186, 1-11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2020.104158>

Hiebert, R. E. (1991). Public relations as a weapon of modern warfare. *Public Relations Review* Vol. 17, No. 2, 107-116, DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/0363-8111\(91\)90049-Q](https://doi.org/10.1016/0363-8111(91)90049-Q)

Hjarvard, S. (2008). The Mediatization of Society: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Social and Cultural Change. *Nordicom Review* Vol. 29, No. 2, 105-134. DOI: <https://www.sciendo.com/article/10.1515/nor-2017-0181>

Hoskins, A. & O'Loughlin, B. (2010) *War and Media: The Emergence of Diffused War*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hoskins, A. & O'Loughlin, B. (2015). Arrested war: the third phase of mediatization. *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 18, No. 11, 1320-1338, DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2015.1068350

Horten, G. (2011). The Mediatization of War: A Comparison of the American and German Media Coverage of the Vietnam and Iraq Wars. *American Journalism*, Vol. 28, No. 4, 29-53. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08821127.2011.10677801>

Kuckartz, U. (2014). *Qualitative Text Analysis: A Guide to Methods, Practice & Using Software*. London: SAGE.

Latvian State Security Service. (2020). *Annual Report*. Retrieved from <https://vdd.gov.lv/en/?rt=documents&ac=download&id=59>

Maltby, S. (2012). The mediatization of the military. *Media, War & Conflict*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 255–268. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635212447908>

Marnot, D. & Juurvee, I. (2020). Narratives on the Nordic-Baltic Countries Promoted by Russia. In *Russia's Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment* NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 32-51. Retrieved from https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfs/?file=/cuploads/pfiles/russias_footprint_nb8_2020_nato_stratcom_coe.pdf?zoom=page-fit

Mazzoleni, G. & Schulz, W. (1999). "Mediatization" of Politics: A Challenge for Democracy? *Political Communication* Vol. 16, No. 3, 247-261, DOI: 10.1080/105846099198613

McQuail, D. (2006). On the Mediatization of War: A Review Article. *International Communication Gazette*, Vol. 68, No. 2, 107-118. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048506062227>

National Security Concept (2019). Retrieved from <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/309647>

Official Language Law (2000). Retrieved from <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/14740>

Schulz, W. (2004). Reconstructing Mediatization as an Analytical Concept. *European Journal of Communication* Vol. 19, No. 1, 87-101. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323104040696>

Siebert, F. S., Peterson, T., & Schramm, W. (1963). *Four Theories of the Press* Urbana: University of Illinois Press. (Original work published 1956)

Strömbäck, J. (2008). Four Phases of Mediatization: An Analysis of the Mediatization of Politics. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 228-246. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161208319097>

Strömbäck, J. (2016). Mediatization. In: G. Mazzoleni, ed. *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118541555.wbiepc124>

Teperik, D. (2020). *The Kremlin's Obsession with Glorifying Falsified History*. ICDS. Retrieved from <https://icds.ee/en/the-kremlins-obsession-with-glorifying-falsified-history>

Wilkinson, S. (1998). Focus group methodology: a review. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 181-203, DOI: 10.1080/13645579.1998.10846874

List of focus group discussions

Riga, 18 – 20: 9 inhabitants of Riga aged 18 – 20, Russian language in the family, level of education – primary and secondary, September 15, 2020, Riga in person, 95 minutes.

Riga, 35 – 45: 8 inhabitants of Riga aged 35 – 45, Russian language in the family, level of education – secondary and secondary professional, September 16, 2020, Riga in person, 103 minutes.

Riga, 65+: 8 inhabitants of Riga aged over 65, Russian language in the family, level of education – secondary and secondary professional, September 17, 2020, Riga in person, 84 minutes.

Daugavpils, 18 – 20: 7 inhabitants of Daugavpils aged 18 – 20, Russian language in the family, level of education – primary and secondary, September 18, 2020, Daugavpils in person, 71 minutes.

Daugavpils, 35 – 45: 8 inhabitants of Daugavpils aged 35 – 45, Russian language in the family, level of education – primary, secondary, and secondary professional, September 19, 2020, Daugavpils in person, 50 minutes.

Daugavpils, 65+: 7 inhabitants of Daugavpils aged over 65, Russian language in the family, level of education – secondary and secondary professional, September 19, 2020, Daugavpils in person, 71 minutes.



CSSR Research report No. 01/22. June 2022

Raksts atspoguļo autora personīgo viedokli un nav uzskatāms par Latvijas Nacionālo bruņoto spēku vai Latvijas Republikas Aizsardzības ministrijas oficiālo nostāju.

The views expressed are the responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Latvian National Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defence.

Drošības un stratēģiskās pētniecības centrs (DSPC) ir Nacionālās aizsardzības akadēmijas (LNAA) zinātniskais institūts. DSPC mērķis ir nodrošināt NAA zinātnisko darbību, veicināt militārās zinātnes attīstību Latvijā un īstenot pētnieciskos projektus atbilstoši Latvijas drošības un aizsardzības politikas prioritātēm. DSPC veic pētījumus aizsardzības nozares vajadzībām, piedalās valsts un starptautiskas nozīmes pētījumos, sniedz konsultācijas un atbalsta aizsardzības nozares organizācijas, organizē konferences, seminārus un lekcijas, publicē pētījumu rezultātus un informatīvus materiālus, piedalās publiskās diskusijās par Latvijas drošībai un aizsardzībai nozīmīgiem jautājumiem, piedalās NAA studiju programmu veidošanā un realizācijā.

The Centre for Security and Strategic Research (CSSR) is the research arm of the Latvian National Defence Academy (LNDA). The aim of the CSSR is to facilitate academic research at the LNDA, further develop military research in Latvia, and undertake research related to Latvia's security and defence policy priorities. CSSR carries out research commissioned by the Latvian Ministry of Defence and the National Armed Forces, participates in national and international research projects, consults and supports organizations that are part of the defence sector, organizes conferences, seminars, and lectures, publishes research and informative materials, participates in public discussions on defence-related issues, and contributes to the study process at LNDA.

**Latvijas Nacionālās aizsardzības akadēmijas
Drošības un stratēģiskās pētniecības centrs
Ezermalas iela 8B, Rīga, Latvija, LV-1014
Tālrunis: +371 67076881 Fax: +371 67076888
naa.mil.lv/lv**

**National Defense Academy of Latvia
Centre for Security and Strategic Research
Ezermalas street 8B, Riga, Latvia LV-1014
Phone: +37167076881 Fax: +371 67076888
www.naa.mil.lv/en**