COMMUNICATION OF COVID-19 CONSEQUENCES IN THE BALTIC STATES INFORSPHERE

V. I. Zabotkina [1]
O. V. Pavlenko [1]
E. L. Boyarskaya [1, 2]
E. Yu. Moiseeva [1, 3]

[1] Russian State University for the Humanities
6 Miusskaya square, Moscow, 125993, Russia
[2] Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University
14 A. Nevskogo St, Kaliningrad, 236016, Russia
[3] Maxim Gorky Literature Institute
25a Povarskaya St, Moscow, 121069, Russia

Received 01 August 2020
doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2020-4-8

This article seeks to describe the dynamics of COVID-19 in the Baltic States and to analyse the ways of communicating the threat and its consequences. Particular attention is paid to the media strategies pursued in the study area. The research is based on Russian and English texts from the Baltic media, WHO official documents and datasets, as well as initiatives of the Baltic Sea region organisations (2020) counteracting COVID-19. A combination of these sources builds up an objective view of the situation and demonstrates how the pandemic and its consequences are represented in public consciousness given a certain pragmatic goal. The pandemic is a new type of threat; its consequences demonstrate a tendency towards negative synergy and a category shift from soft threats to hard ones. The research shows that several key strategies — counter-active, projective, conservative, mobilising, resilient, and reflective — are used to communicate the threat and its consequences in the media.

Keywords:
threat, risk, assessment, consequences, strategy, communication.

Introduction

Over recent years, global risks and threats have multiplied. Countries in different regions of the world are facing threats they have never faced before.

To cite this article: Zabotkina, V. I., Pavlenko, O. V., Boyarskaya, E. L., Moiseeva, E. Yu. 2020, Communication of COVID-19 consequences in the Baltic States inforsphere, *Balt. Reg.*, Vol. 12, no. 4, p. 147—164. doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2020-4-8.

The end of 2019—2020 and several years before them contributed to a new understanding of global and regional risks and threats as well as their scale and consequences.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in January 2020, is one of the most serious threats of its kind. The history of humanity is a history of pandemics and epidemics — from the bubonic plague in the Middle Ages to epidemics of the contemporary period. Since the 19th century, epidemics caused by different influenza strains have been registered in almost all countries of the world. According to different estimates, the outbreak of the H1N1 virus, commonly known as the Spanish flu, took a toll estimated at 50 to 100 m people. Earlier epidemics caused by coronaviruses were less devastating: severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), the first coronavirus epidemic, killed more than 800 people in 2002—2003. Then Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) broke out, taking a toll of 912 lives. Most deaths occurred within the Arabian Peninsula.[1] Although viruses and bacteria that caused epidemics and pandemics in the past continue to coexist with humanity, contemporary medicine and pharmacology, as well as international cooperation in disease prevention and control, managed to hold them at bay. The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented challenge because of the number of cases and the morbidity and mortality of the virus. The timeline of the pandemic suggests that humanity will have to live with COVID-19 for a long time.

The pandemic began less than a year ago, but the scale of the threat is unprecedented. The danger of COVID-19 is not only its mortality — the pandemic has affected almost all aspects of public life. Thus, assessing the consequences of this type of threat is of particular interest. It is too early to draw final conclusions since the second wave, which first emerged at the end of August 2020, offers no hope of a swift end of the pandemic. Still, we can identify and group key consequences of COVID-19 and examine responses of pandemic-stricken countries and regions.

This study aims to track and analyse the dynamics of COVID-19 in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, as well as to explore how the consequences of this threat are communicated in the region. Special attention is paid to the media strategies adopted by the Baltics and the objectives achieved by communicating the threat.

The detection of threats, the investigation of their consequences and the way they are communicated have been in the focus of international research over the past decade. The profusion of studies in this field points to steady academic interest in this problem. Remarkably, most of the relevant works were published in 2015—2020. Their authors overview existing threats and risks

[1] How do pandemics end? *BBC news*. URL: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-876f42ae-5e44—41c0-ba2d-d6fd537aadfe (accessed 07.10.2020).

[1; 2] and assess economic [3], environmental [4], and sociocultural threats [5]. A prominent endeavour in the last category is the thesaurus of sociocultural threats [6; 7]. The Baltic region, which is a major macroregion of Europe, and challenges and threats faced by its countries are also the subject matter of recent publications [8—12].

The stages and central concepts of the study

This contribution describes the dynamics of COVID-19 in the three Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) — members of the EU and constituents of the Baltic Sea region. Understanding this 'double affiliation' is essential because the study uses official COVID-19 policy documents of European, regional, and national levels. First, the key concepts employed in this research must be defined.

Risk is understood as an event or condition that, when in effect, will have negative consequences for countries, industries, population, and individuals.

Threat is defined as an external poorly controllable (or uncontrollable) event that might cause damage or is perceived as such by countries, industries, population or individuals. A threat is a combination of factors and conditions that can have a damaging effect on the individual and society. A threat always brings about danger. In this analysis, danger denotes the condition of an object exposed to a threat.

The analysis of risks and threats as communicated in the English-language media of the Baltics was carried out in three stages.

At stage one, statistical data on the progress of the pandemic of the Baltics were selected based on the reliability of the source, representativeness, and the relevance of described parameters. All these requirements were met by data from the World Health Organisation,[2] the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC),[3] and reports from the ministries of health of Latvia,[4] Lithuania,[5] and Estonia.[6] These sources provided comprehensive coverage of threats and risks of the pandemic as well as of the national strategies for mitigating them.

[2] World Health Organization. URL: https://covid19.who.int/ (accessed 01.11.2020).

[3] European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. URL: https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en (accessed 01.09.2020).

[4] Veselibas ministrija. URL: https://www.vm.gov.lv/lv/ (accessed 01.09.2020)

[5] Ministry of Health of the Republic of Lithuania. URL: https://sam.lrv.lt/en/ (accessed 01.11.2020).

[6] Ministry of Social Affairs, Terviseamet URL: https://www.terviseamet.ee/et (accessed 01.11.2020).

A selected website or periodical had to satisfy the following conditions: it is a trustworthy regional medium; it has a strong web presence; it is regularly updated; it has a 2019—2020 print or online archive [12; 13].

The study also used documents of the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference, publications from European programmes and projects run in the Baltics, reports from news agencies, and articles from the *Baltic Times, Baltic Rim Economies, Baltic News Network, Baltic Course*, and other media. As an additional source of information, the English-language COVID-19 Corpus was used alongside digests of popular Russian- and English-language Baltic websites and news aggregators. This array of sources aided in creating a total picture of the Baltic media agenda over the study period.

At stage two, articles and news items were selected that were conceptually and thematically relevant to the subject of research –risks and threats faced by the Baltics amid the pandemic. The identification of the threat and its consequences was carried out based on Melvin Mencher's scale of newsworthiness. The following newsworthiness factors were considered: timeliness, prominence, impact, conflict, and the unusual [13]. When selecting a source or material and identifying a threat, its scale, and consequences, the occurrence of references was taken into account to estimate the newsworthiness of events, the actual interest in them from the regional media, and public response.

At the final stage, goals and strategies of communicating threats and their consequences are analysed using examples from the Baltic media.

Grouping the key consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic helped describe the threat, place it within the systems of political discourse and collective consciousness, and juxtapose it with other types of challenges and threats.

The COVID-19 pandemic in the Baltics

Obviously, the main news of the end of 2020 — the beginning of 2020 was the COVID-19 pandemic. As stated by the WHO, on 1 November 2020, the number of cases worldwide was above 45m and 1.2m people died.[7]

The virus has done what 'no other virus or bacteria has done over the past 100 years: 'it locked in most of the planet's population and paralysed the public and economic life of many states. It remains a mystery to the world academia. … Yet SARS-Cov-2 deserves credit for helping us understand: the threat of a

[7] World Health Organization. URL: https://covid19.who.int/ (accessed 01.11.2020).

new infection is as real as it was 100, 200, or 300 years ago'.[8] The pandemic has affected the lives of all the Baltic Sea countries on the macro- and microlevel. It has interfered with globalisation, integration, and regionalisation.

Before tracking the dynamics of the pandemic in the Baltics, it is important to look into the regional situation and how the three countries perform on some key indicators compared to other Baltic Sea states. Fig. 1 shows the pandemic timeline in the region. The first COVID-19 cases were confirmed in all the Baltic States nearly at the same time — from the end of February to the first week of March 2020. This is a natural state of affairs in a region bound together by close economic, social, and cultural ties. The epidemic progressed very similarly in the Baltics: a sharp increase in the number of cases in March and April was followed by a prolonged plateau until September 2020, a slight rise in cases in September, and a rapid spread of the infection in October 2020. The number of cases was going up the fastest in Poland, particularly in October 2020.

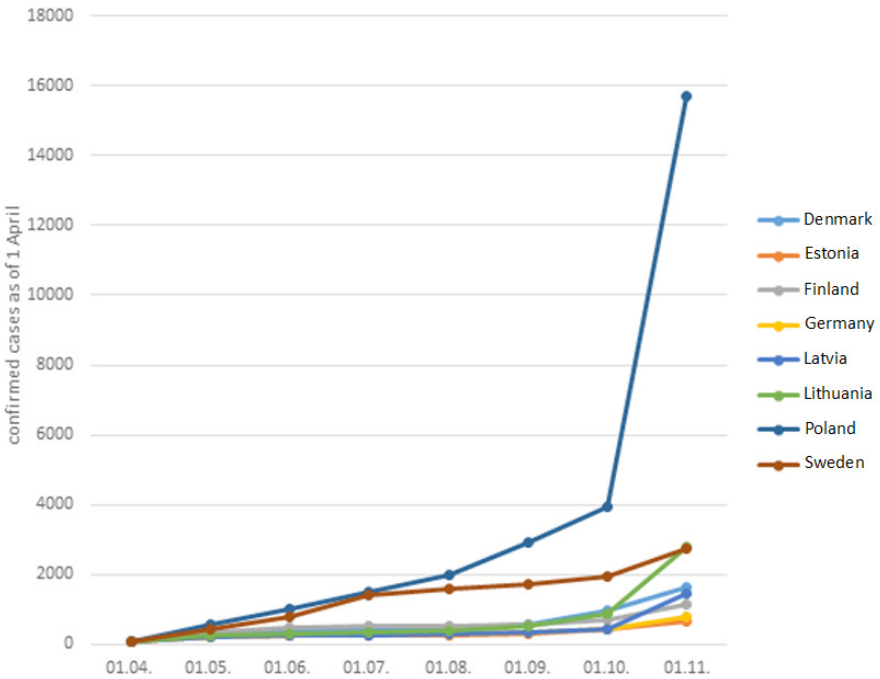

Fig. 1 The progress of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Baltic Sea states

Source: prepared by the authors based on data from the European CDC[9]

[8] Alkhovsky, S. The epidemics of the future: what threats are to be expected? *RBC*. URL: https://trends.rbc.ru/trends/social/5ecbb0b99a79471c99221ca2 (accessed 05.09.2020).

[9] Distribution of cumulative reported cases. *European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control*. URL: https://qap.ecdc.europa.eu/public/extensions/COVID-19/COVID-19.html#country-comparison-tab (accessed 01.11.2020).

The per-capita spread rate varies in the region from 1278.6 cases per 100,000 population in Sweden to 291.6 in Finland. As of the time of writing, the lowest death per 100,000 rate is in Latvia at 3.7, the highest, in Sweden, at 57.5 (Table 1). Overall, the pandemic has been milder in the Baltics that in the other Baltic Sea states. This can be a result of early restrictions (including those on public transport and mass gatherings), self-isolation and quarantine, adequate policy responses, effective health services, and responsible behaviour of the community. The extent of the efforts to fight the pandemic is evidenced by the data collected by the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference and the preparedness of the countries of the region to respond to an escalation of the pandemic.[10]

Table 1

Comparative indicators of the development of the pandemic in the Baltic Sea states (WHO data of 1.11.2020)

Country	Total cases	Cases per 100,000 population	Mortality	Mortality per 100,000 population
Germany	532 930	640.8	10 481	12.6
Poland	362 731	955.6	5 631	14.8
Sweden	132 050	1278.6	5 938	57.5
Denmark	46 351	796.0	721	12.4
Finland	16 113	291.6	358	6.5
Lithuania	14 824	530.5	165	5.9
Latvia	5 894	309.0	71	3.7
Estonia	4 905	369.1	73	5.5

Source: World Health Organization[11].

Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia have lower morbidity and mortality rates compared to other Baltic Sea states (only Finland is doing better). Nevertheless, the three countries have been fully exposed to all the negative effects of the pandemic.

[10] Handling and Combating the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Baltic Sea Countries. Handling and Combating the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Baltic Sea Countries. URL: http://www.bspc.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/BSPC_Handling-and-Combating-the-COVID-19-Pandemic-in-the-Baltic-Sea-Countries.pdf (accessed 09.10.2020).

[11] World Health Organization. URL: https://covid19.who.int/ (accessed 01.11.2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic as a type of threat. The synergy of negative effects

This section attempts at characterising and grouping key consequences of the pandemic, which is viewed as a threat of a special type. Although pandemics, as well as other epidemics and diseases, are traditionally classed under soft threats (see Global Risk Analysis, 2020),[12] they have a wide range of consequences. The COVID-19 pandemic is a global phenomenon that has pronounced *geopolitical, economic, ecological, social, and technology-related consequences* at a regional level.

Geopolitically, the pandemic has led to the severance of traditional ties, involuntary self-isolation of states, border closure, and, in many cases, restrictions on national travel. The Baltics joined the common EU response and imposed travel limitations. The Union introduced a 'colour-code' system. 'Red' areas had more than 50 cases per 100,000 population over 14 days; 'orange', from 25 to 50; 'green', below 25. The scope of testing was taken into account when calculating those figures.

Mobility rights have been traditionally viewed as an essential freedom, and travel restrictions have damaged whole industries of the Baltics' economies and caused a collapse in public optimism, although the Baltics left the borders open for some categories of travellers.

The closure of borders and travel restrictions had serious repercussions on the economy. Tourism and transport were the first industries to feel the pinch. Regional airlines, for example, the Latvian AirBaltic, had to suspend all flights until mid-April 2020. Later, it would substantially reduce the number of connections.[13] Over two months, from April to May, 580 flights were cancelled.[14] The company had to dismiss at least 250 of its 1600-strong staff.

In *economic* terms, the Baltic Sea states went into the so-called coronavirus recession, which became apparent as the stock market crashed in March 2020. The economies of the Baltics have suffered very badly in the pandemic. Small and open, the economies of the three states have relatively strong transport industries, which were severely affected by plummeting external demand. Pandemic control measures have influenced household consumption patterns, in-

[12] *The Global Risks Report,* 2020. URL: http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Global_Risk_Report_2020.pdf (accessed 01.08.2020).

[13] Cummins N. airBaltic Suspends All Flights Until Mid April // *Simple Flying*. URL: https://simpleflying.com/air-baltic-suspends-all-flights (accessed 20.05.2020).

[14] Kaminski-Morrow D. Air Baltic to cut staff as coronavirus ends positive run // *FlightGlobal*. https://www.flightglobal.com/airlines/air-baltic-to-cut-staff-as-coronavirus-ends-positive-run/137190.article (accessed 12.05.2020).

dustrial production, and the once rapidly growing tourism sector. Tax reliefs and the rather quick relaxation of restrictions have supported the economic activity. Thus, the decline of the GDP in the Baltics will probably be less substantial than in other EU member states. Fitch Ratings expects the public debt/GDP ratio to reach its maximum in Lithuania and Estonia and to approach that in Latvia.[15] Public debt will rise to a record high in the region, responding to the alarming budget deficit situation.

The Baltics estimate that their economies will fall by a total of 8% in 2020.[16]

Social consequences include an increase in the unemployment rate, which also applies to structural unemployment, enormous pressure on the health system, a growing mortality rate, and pervasive depression as a repercussion of quarantine and self-isolation. In January 2020, the unemployment rate in Latvia was at 6%. September's data show an upward trend (8.1%).[17] In Estonia, the unemployment rate was 4.1% in January and 7.1% in September 2020. The latter figure is the highest since 2016. The total number of unemployed reached 49.4 thousand people, which is a clear sign of how the COVID-19 crisis has affected the country.[18] Lithuania has suffered more than the other Baltic States. Its unemployment rate was 9.2% in January and above 14% in September. The number of people looking for a job reached 243,371.[19]

The environmental and technological effects of the pandemic have not been fully evaluated so far. ' [A] t one end of the scale, there is … a reduction in emissions from transport and shutdown production facilities, a decline in water and electricity consumption due to the closure of stores and offices. On the other, there is disposable personal protective equipment (PPE), extra packaging, panic buying, etc.'[20] A major challenge is the utilisation of used masks and gloves after the introduction of mandatory wearing of PPE in public.

---

[15] Baltic Sovereigns Facing Growth and Fiscal Shock // *Fitch Ratings*. URL: https://www.fitchratings.com/research/sovereigns/baltic-sovereigns-facing-growth-fiscal-shock-30—09—2020 (accessed 01.10.2020).

[16] Coronavirus: Baltic states open a pandemic 'travel bubble'. *BBC News*. URL: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52673373 (accessed 18.05.2020).

[17] Unemployment rate in September 2020. *CSB of Latvia*. URL: https://www.csb.gov.lv/en/Statistics/COVID19/Unemployment-rate-in-September-2020 (accessed 28.10.2020).

[18] Employment Rate in Estonia decreased to 68.10 percent in the first quarter of 2020 from 69.20 percent in the fourth quarter of 2020. *Trading Economics*. URL: https://tradingeconomics.com/estonia/employment-rate (accessed 00.00.2020).

[19] Employment Rate in Lithuania decreased to 71.40 percent in the second quarter of 2020 from 73 percent in the first quarter of 2020. *Trading Economics*. URL: https://tradingeconomics.com/lithuania/employment-rate (accessed 28.10.2020).

[20] What will be discarded after the pandemic and what can help the planet right now. *RBC*. URL: https://trends.rbc.ru/trends/green/5e8b405c9a7947028ac3bf50 (accessed 18.05.2020) (in Russ.)

The virus survives in sewage, as Finnish physicians and ecologists have shown.[21] Quite unexpectedly, a group of ecologists have pointed to the substantial environmental impact of internet streaming, which has grown incredibly since most employees were transitioned to remote working and school children and university students, to remote learning. HD video streaming in 3G networks is associated with an extra 90g/h of greenhouse emissions. In February-March 2020, the use of streaming services went up 30%. In March this year, a major hub of European servers, DE-CIX, which is located in Frankfurt, recorded data throughput at 9.16 Tbit/s — the highest ever measured worldwide. This is equivalent to over 2m HD videos transmitted at the same time.[22]

In terms of the *magnitude of its effect*, the COVID-19 pandemic is a rare case of a threat targeting both the individual and society. Social networks fail, people are faced with a loss of social status due to unemployment, depression caused by self-isolation and restrictions affecting public life is omnipresent. The pandemic can be described as both a *hard and a soft threat*. As the traditional definition of hard threat suggests, it includes security risks, violence, military conflicts, abuse of power, and technology abuse (including that of information technology). Soft threats are personality disorders, poverty, unemployment, a potential loss of cultural identity, etc. From this perspective, the pandemic has the features of both types of threat since it endangers society and the individual as well as leads to unemployment, depression, and uncertainty fatigue. The true psychological consequences of the pandemic are still unknown. What is clear now is that they will make the top of the negative effects of the pandemic. As a study carried out at Vilnius University's Centre for Psychotraumatology in summer 2020, when the spread of the virus temporarily slowed down, most respondents '… felt very scared, anxious, sad or lonely. Almost half of them were affected by restrictions on contacts with relatives; one-fourth experienced difficulties in adapting to the new state of affairs'.[23]

The common classification of threats by the *time of appearance* (they are divided into traditional, new, and recent ones) does not apply to the current pandemic. On the one hand, the previous century saw several major epidemics and the Spanish flu pandemic, and thus COVID-19 can be viewed as a traditional

[21] Coronavirus found in waste water in Helsinki and Turku but not at other sites monitored weekly. *TLH.FI*. URL: https://thl.fi/en/web/thlfi-en/-/coronavirus-found-in-waste-water-in-helsinki-and-turku-but-not-at-other-sites-monitored-weekly] (accessed 06.06.2020).

[22] German experts calculate impact of streaming and video games on environment. *Kommersant*. URL: https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4485170 (accessed 11.09.2020) (in Russ.).

[23] Most people struggle with stress, and emotional toil disturbs daily life. *Sputnik*. URL: https://lt.sputniknews.ru/society/20201101/13556662/Zhitelyam-Litvy-dali-sovety-dlya-psikhologicheskogo-zdorovya-vo-vremya-COVID-19.html (accessed 01.11.2020) (in Russ.).

rather than a new or newest threat. On the other hand, as long as the scale of its consequences and strategies to control it are considered, it is a recent threat, similar to antibiotic resistance, biohacking, and technology abuse. Until 2020, humanity was never faced in its recent history with a threat of such magnitude and with such versatile repercussions.

When analysing and evaluating the consequences of a threat, it is essential to consider both the above characteristics and the media response. The latter factor is subjective for the most part. Its value varies depending on the time, scope, and objectiveness of media reports, whether information about risks may be withheld, and whether the risk of threat is downplayed or exaggerated in the eyes of society. Objective coverage contributes to the prompt introduction of protective measures and the calibration of risk management options.

The goals and strategies of communicating threats

Alongside the consequences discussed above, it is imperative to study media strategies, which have an enormous influence on the formulation of strategies for the socio-political narrative generated and/or propagated by the media in the Baltic Sea region and the world amid the COVID-19 pandemic. What is unique to the current situation is that the global spread of the pandemic and the similarity of its consequences across the world make it possible to identify different national media strategies for communicating the threat and its effects. Common strategies for communicating the threat will be examined below using examples from the Baltics media and official sources.

In the thick of the pandemic when the hazard is both *omnipresent and new*, it is impossible to predict how the situation will develop in the future and what strategy each country will choose. Our study shows that, when raising awareness of all things coronavirus, the media of the three Baltic States confined themselves to factual information and refrained from making judgments. This approach was used to inform people of the actual state of affairs, using figures, situation reports, diagrams, descriptions of symptoms and modes of transmission, etc. Major news agencies, aggregators, and search engines launched their own coronavirus trackers, maps, and counters that accumulated available information. An illustration of this is the news item published by the *Baltic News Network (BNN):*

> Across the Baltic states, over the past day to Wednesday … Lithuanian health authorities have confirmed 73 new cases of COVID-19. Meanwhile, 12 new cases

> have been found in Latvia and 57 in Estonia. 12 new coronavirus infection cases were found in Latvia over the course of the past day, which means the total number of COVID-19 patients since the start of the pandemic is 1,572 in the central Baltic country. The latest data on Estonia showed 3,033 confirmed COVID-19 cases, which means 57 new infection cases were found in the country over the past day.[24]

This approach to communicating threats is used not only by regional media but also by national authorities and international organisations. For instance, it is employed in documents prepared by the Council of the Baltic Sea States and the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference. These papers contain facts and reports on the spread of the virus on the Åland Islands, in the Baltics, Germany, Poland, Russia, and Sweden. Supplying information without commentary or analysis is not a full-scale strategy, yet the provision of factual information also serves its purpose. What makes a media strategy a strategy is the formulation of the goal and the attainment of the expected result. The analysis of the Baltics media space during the COVID-19 pandemic shows that it imparts information with the following aims: a) to control the spread of COVID-19; b) to provide comprehensive coverage of the pandemic, based on constant updates; c) to separate real news from fake reports (rumours, unverified data); d) to identify newsworthy coronavirus-related events; e) to prevent panic; f) to instil in society set behaviour patterns for responding to the coronavirus.

Our analysis of the media space demonstrates that there are at least six principal media strategies — *counter-active, projective, conservative, mobilising, resilient and reflective*. These strategies are universal since all of them are used to communicate threats either individually or collectively, depending on what goal they must achieve. Below, we will consider each of them in detail.

The *counter-active strategy*, which is used by all the Baltic States to communicate the threat, calls for firm action against the threat and a tit-for-tat response: each threatening thesis presented in the media has an antithesis that activates a counter-agenda, which seeks to repel the direct invasion of public life by reports on the threat. This is a strategy of conflict, either an over or a covert one, which implies that the positions of the opposing sides may reverse. In case of a global threat, this strategy attempts to dispel, eviscerate the threat to strip it of its dominance.

[24] Latest infections with COVID-19 in Baltic states, 2020, *BNN*. URL: https://bnn-news.com/latest-infections-with-covid-19-in-baltic-states-217186 (accessed 23.09.2020).

A vivid example of this strategy used in social media is a tweet by the Prime Minister of Latvia, Saulius Skvernelis. He emphasises the need to counter the threat, points to past experiences, and expresses his hope that the consequences of the pandemic will be overcome by common action:

> Throughout history, the Baltic States of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have been exposed to a variety of challenges. We will overcome this one as well, thanks to excellent understanding and coordination.[25]

The *projective strategy* focuses on communicating short- and long-term response plans, not all of which may be implemented in practice. Yet, the job of the media, particularly of official outlets is to show that projections are possible. The central message is that 'we' are not giving up, we will continue to fight.' An example of the projective strategy at play is the following item from the Baltic News Network:

> Latvia's government approved Healthcare Ministry's proposed strategy for limitation of COVID-19. This strategy provides four risk categories, with the first the lowest and fourth the highest. Latvia is currently in the third risk category, explains Latvia's Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš. The plan, which details restrictions at specific infection indexes, outlines three factors that may lead to the fourth risk category.[26]

The obtained findings suggest that the projective strategy has two main variations, radical and moderate. A radical strategy produces ideal models of the future, a new reality, and new identity strategies. An illustration of such a strategy is a quotation from the speech of the First Deputy Chancellor at the Government of Lithuania, Luka Savickas, which was published by the koronastop.lrv.lt news portal:

> In his presentation on Lithuania's economic response to the pandemic, the Deputy Chancellor Savickas has said that 'Lithuania sees this crisis not only as a challenge but also as an opportunity: first, the countries will seek to shorten and diversify supply chains; second, Lithuania has a chance to become one of the EU hubs for life sciences, research and industry; third, food supply chains will become shorter and thus add to greater sustainability; fourth and fifth, the economy will move faster to a digital and green economy.[27]

---

[25] Saulius Skvernelis, *Official Account of Prime Minister of the Republic of Lithuania*, URL: https://twitter.com/Skvernelis_S/status/1261158322692030465 (accessed 15.05.2020).

[26] Latvian government explains what could happen if Latvia enters 'red zone' with COVID-19// *BNN*. URL: https://bnn-news.com/latvian-government-explains-what-could-happen-if-latvia-enters-red-zone-with-covid-19—218295 (accessed 28.10.2020).

[27] Lithuania's efforts to combat COVID-19 come into world's spotlight. *Korona Stop*. URL: https://koronastop.lrv.lt/en/news/lithuanias-efforts-to-combat-covid-19-come-into-worlds-spotlight (accessed 22.05.2020).

A moderate projective strategy suggests an extrapolation of positive past and future trends, as seen in the following quotation: 'Will the tight restrictions return? Latvia's waiting for the Ministry of Health to decide. Latvia is dealing better with the coronavirus than its neighbours do. Still, we cannot afford to be complacent, epidemiologists warn'.[28]

The *conservative strategy* means resistance to the destabilisation of public life and appeals to the established systems of values, norms, and principles that constitute the 'natural course of things'. The conservative strategy thrives on the heroic deeds of the past, placing the threat in the context of earlier challenges: not once was society put to sore trials, perhaps more serious and widespread than the current one, yet it prevailed thanks to unity and other virtues. Leaders of nations are usually among advocates of the conservative idea, and the job of the media is to convey the messages of heads of states. The conservative strategy sets out to bring to the fore eternal values and inspire people to take common action. The fact that the media resort to it indicates how serious the threat is. The conservative strategy is sought-after in the most difficult situations, such as the current pandemic:

> The head of the Estonian Cabinet, Jüri Ratas, address the nation on the spread of the coronavirus, says a post on his Facebook page. He spoke in Russia, although the only official language in the country is Estonian: 'This weekend and next weeks will decide whether we stop the virus or not. For that, we only have one formula: we have to adhere to the rules. … It is vital to brief your family, friends, colleagues, and everyone else on these rule. It is 'us-time' now, not 'me-time'…[29]

The *mobilising strategy* is about pulling together the resources of society, as shown in the following excerpt from the *Baltic Course*:

> Latvian society needs to mobilize in order to be able to stop the rapid spread of COVID-19 in the country through joint efforts, President Egils Levits emphasized in a message to the public on Sunday.
>
> 'There is no room for chaotic action or overconfidence in Latvia. We need to be rational. Our goal is to break the spiral of the pandemic. We need to be decisive,' said Levits.[30]

---

[28] Will the tight restrictions return? Lativa's waiting for the Ministry of Health to decide. *Baltnews*. URL: https://lv.baltnews.com/mir_novosti/20200807/1024100899/Vernutsya-li-strogie-ogranicheniya-Latviya-zhdet-resheniya-Minzdrava.html (accessed 07.08.2020).

[29] Yuri Ratas: the coming weeks will determine whether we will stop the virus or not, 2020, *ERR.ee*. URL: https://rus.err.ee/1070038/obrawenie-juri-ratasa-predstojawie-vyhodnye-i-nedeli-opredeljat-ostanovim-my-virus-ili-net (accessed 28.03.2020) (in Russ.)

[30] Levits calls on public to mobilize to stop spread of COVID-19. *The Baltic Course*. URL: http://www.baltic-course.com/eng/markets_and_companies/?doc=160281&output=d (accessed 26.10.2020).

As a rule, a champion of public interests is chosen to drive mobilisation. To follow this strategy, the media need a prominent public figure, preferably, a professional or an activist who embodies courage and occupational ethics and acts as a situational opinion leader whose expertise is much sought after. Unlike the counter-active strategy, this strategy suggests proactive defence rather than an attack. In the pandemic, the media have found heroes of the time among physicians, volunteers, and social workers, whose personal example highlighted by the media inspires people to rise to the challenge. Using the mobilising strategy, the media have motivated their audiences to abide by the rules, use protective equipment, help each other, and keep clam. An example of this strategy is the following quotation:

> Rally of gratitude: how people support doctors fighting coronavirus. Doctors have always saved human lives, but, in the pandemic, their work holds the answer to the question 'when will everything get back to normal?' As medical professionals deal with the coronavirus, people all over the world rally in their support. Applause, words of gratitude, and shining lights — people are extremely grateful to doctors and are trying to support them as much as they can'.[31]

The media use the *resilient strategy* less often than the other ones. In most cases, it is employed when reporting tragic news, for instance, mortality-related materials. In the pandemic, the stoic strategy has gained traction as the gravity and scale of current threats has increased. An example of the stoic strategy is the following excerpt from a speech of the President of Latvia Eglis Levits, which was published in the *Baltic Course*:

> 'Every day come new alarming figures about the spread of the pandemic. It's not just statistics — our fellow human beings are also behind it,' the president said, adding that 'today we must not listen to the populists, as their fake news threatens our fellow human beings and the public as a whole'.[32]

The resilient strategy for communicating threats draws as a rule on identity and the strength of character. It was extensively used during the lockdown when calls for stoicism permeated the media.

The information space was filled with stories of how important it is *not to do* something — not to visit public space, not to use public transport, not to leave home, not to see friends, etc. 'Stoic' news cites examples of true grit and composed acceptance.

---

[31] The act of gratitude: people support medics who fight the coronavirus, 2020, *Baltnews*. URL: https://lv.baltnews.com/video/20200325/1023780505/Aktsiya-blagodarnosti-kak- podderzhivayut-vrachey-boryuschikhsya-s-koronavirusom.html (accessed 26.10.2020).

[32] Levits calls on public to mobilize to stop spread of COVID-19. *The Baltic Course*. URL: http://www.baltic-course.com/eng/markets_and_companies/?doc=160281&output=d (accessed 26.10.2020).

The *reflective strategy* is aimed at an internal transformation, a search for new rationales, distancing, withdrawal, and finding welcome distractions to preserve one's identity without abandoning the principal values. Using the reflective strategy, the media circulate and promote information on how to take advantage of self-isolation by pursuing hobbies and engaging in all kinds of online activities. These stories help people overcome the difficulties that come hand in hand with the threat. Still, the psychological and other 'soft' consequences of the pandemic are yet to be analysed.

An example of the reflective strategy is the following excerpt from an item published in *Vestnik Tartu*:

> Residents of Tartu on self-isolation: no time to be scared. All of us have gone through the trying times of isolation as COVID-19 began to spread. Schooling, business, all other aspects of life were affected. Medical professionals, sociologists, and psychologists are yet to analyse what happened to us over those nine weeks. Vestnik Tartu offers its own chronicle of the Tartu quarantine told by its witnesses and participants who live in the neighbourhood.[33]

The way printed and electronic media manage communication, which is their primary task, depends on their target audience, whose reaction can be anything — from indifference to panic. The perception of threats depends on many factors — social standing, the system of values, the feeling of security/insecurity, etc. Negative content focusing on a threat of any category (in this case, that of the spread of COVID-19) is reinforced by expert evaluations that verify the threat and related risks, even the more so when much-discussed events are concerned. The factors that may distort the perception of risks in collective consciousness include popular sentiment. Immersion in the problem makes anything related to it a major talking point, and the media will publish any, even unverified, information.

Analysis of risks and threats necessitates understanding the consequences of tampering information. The reaction of the audience aids in both monitoring public opinion and drawing attention to the aspects of the problem that require everyone to contribute to its solution. In the case of COVID-19, the media not only aggregate information coming from the authorities, doctors, and experts but also acquaint wide audiences with the rules of a new reality.

Conclusions

The above analysis showed that the consequences of the spread of COVID-19 in the Baltics can be divided into five groups — geopolitical, economic, eco-

[33] Residents of Tartu about self-isolation: there was no time to be scared, 2020, *Vestnik Tartu*. URL: https://vestniktartu.ee/tartu/zhiteli-tartu-o-zhizni-v-samoizolyaczii-ne/ (accessed 16.06.2020) (in Russ.).

logical, social, and technological. As the situation progresses, the five groups become ever more intertwined. There is a *negative synergy* of threats. From the perspective of its causes and possible consequences, one type of threat can be classed under several categories. For example, the involuntary severance of regional ties and the deteriorating economic performance of the countries in question are inseparably linked to social issues — a growing unemployment rate, isolation-related depression, uncertainty about the future, etc.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the trend towards re-categorisation: the scale, consequences, and gravity of threats that were once viewed as soft cause them to assume characteristics of hard threats. Diseases were viewed as soft threats before the pandemic since, in recent history, they never affected all aspects of public life across the globe.

The scale of the pandemic and its consequences places high emphasis on public relations and the communication of the threat in the local media space. The communication of the threat can pursue various goals: controlling the spread of COVID-19; providing comprehensive coverage of the pandemic; separating real news from fake reports (rumours, unverified data); identifying newsworthy coronavirus-related events; preventing panic; instilling in society a set of behaviour patterns for responding to the coronavirus.

To achieve these goals, a range of media strategies is employed. These are counter-active, projective, conservative, mobilising, resilient and reflective strategies. All of them have been actively employed by English- and Russian-language media of the Baltic States to give the pandemic extensive coverage.

COVID-19 is a new type of threat. Different groups of its consequences are still to be analysed. Many countries are now facing the second wave of the pandemic, re-introduction of quarantine, full or partial lockdowns, transition to homeworking, etc. The protracted crisis will aggravate the effects described in the study and call for new approaches to communicating the threat as a newsworthy concern.

This study was supported by the Russian Science Foundation, project 17-78-30029 Cognitive Mechanisms and Discursive Strategies for Overcoming Sociocultural Treats in Historical Dynamics: Multidisciplinary Research.

References

1. Carpignano, A., Golia, E., Di Mauro, C., Bouchon, S., Nordvik, J-P. 2009, A methodological approach for the definition of multi-risk maps at regional level: first application, *Journal of Risk Research*, vol. 12, no. 3—4, p. 513—534. doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/13669870903050269.

2. Linkov, I. et al. 2018, Tiered approach to resilience assessment, *Risk Analysis*, vol. 38, no. 9, p. 1772—1780. doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/risa.12991.

3. Stepanova, V.V., Sivobrova, I.A., Nikolaev, A.V. 2014, Risk Factors Assessment Model in the Regional Operational Management System, *GISAP: Economics, Jurisprudence and Management*, no. 7. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.18007/gisap: ejm.v0i7.883.

4. Hanski, J., Keränen, J., Molarius, R. 2018, Tools and Methods for Supporting Regional Decision-Making in Relation to Climate Risks, *Climate Change and Global Warming*. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.80322.

5. Lupu, L. 2019, The concept of social risk: A geographical approach, *Quaestiones Geographicae*, vol. 38, no. 4, p. 5—13, available at https://content.sciendo.com/view/journals/quageo/38/4/article-p5.xml (accessed 01.08.2020).

6. Zabotkina V.I., Pozdnyakova E.M. 2020, Cognitive modeling of a conceptual domain sociocultural threats, *Kognitivnye issledovaniya yazyka* [Cognitive studies of language], no. 40, p. 51—65 (in Russ.).

7. Sokruta, E.Yu. 2018, The Narrative Characteristics of News Discourse in the Time of New Media, *The New Philological Bulletin*, no. 2 (45). doi: https://doi.org/10.24411/2072-9316-2018-00013.

8. Česnakas, G., Jakštaitė, G., Juozaitis, J. 2016, Assessment of political vulnerabilities on security of energy supply in the Baltic States, *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics*, vol. 9, no. 1, p. 153—182. https://doi.org/10.1515/bjlp-2016-0007.

9. Kretinin, G.V., Katrovskiy, A.P., Pototskaya, T.I., Fedorov, G.M. 2016, Geopolitical and geo-economic changes in the Baltic Sea Region at the turnoff the XX–XXI centuries, Balt. Reg., no. 4, p. 13—25. doi: https://doi.org/10.5922/2079-8555-2016-4-2.

10. Jönsson, A.M., Boström, M., Dreyer, M., Söderström, S. 2016, Risk Communication and the Role of the Public: Towards Inclusive Environmental Governance of the Baltic Sea? *Environmental Governance of the Baltic Sea*, Springer, Cham, p. 205—227. doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-27006-7_9.

11. Pynnöniemi, K. 2016, Salonius-Pasternak C. Security in the Baltic Sea Region: activation of risk potential, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, UPI Briefing Paper, available4 at: https://researchportal.helsinki.fi/en/publications/security-in-the-baltic-sea-region-activation-of-risk-potential (accessed 10.06.2020).

12. Boisot, M.H. 1995, *Information Space: A framework for learning in organizations, institutions and culture,* Routledge, London.

13. Mencher, M. 2011, *News Reporting and Writing,* NY, McGraw-Hill, 359 p.

The authors

Prof. Vera I. Zabotkina, Vice-rector for International Cooperation, Director of the Centre for Cognitive Programmes and Technology, Russian State University for the Humanities, Russia

E-mail: Zabotkina@rggu.ru

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6674-8052

Prof. Olga V. Pavlenko, First Vice-rector, Vice-rector for Research, Russian State University for the Humanities, Russia.

E-mail: pavlenko@rggu.ru

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5734-4048

Dr Elena L. Boyarskaya, Associate Professor, Institute for the Humanities, Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, Russia; Research Fellow, Centre for Cognitive Programmes and Technology, Russian State University for the Humanities, Russia.

E-mail: EBoyarskaya@kantiana.ru

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0179-8643

Dr Ekaterina Yu. Moiseeva, Research Fellow, Centre for Cognitive Programmes and Technology, Russian State University for the Humanities, Russia; Senior Research Fellow, Maxim Gorky Literature Institute, Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia.

E-mail: sokruta@gmail.com

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7275-1714