

Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis

Uppsala Studies in Media and Communication 18

Illustration on the cover by Linnea Blixt

Making Sense of Russian Strategic Narratives

Affect and Reception Among Young
Russian Speakers in Latvia

EMMA RÖNNGREN



UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET

Dissertation presented at Uppsala University to be publicly examined in Hörsal 2, Ekonomikum, Kyrkogårdsgatan 10, Uppsala, Friday, 21 March 2025 at 10:15 for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The examination will be conducted in English. Faculty examiner: Professor Göran Bolin (Södertörn University).

Abstract

Rönngren, E. 2025. Making Sense of Russian Strategic Narratives. Affect and Reception Among Young Russian Speakers in Latvia. *Uppsala Studies in Media and Communication* 18. 221 pp. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. ISBN 978-91-513-2372-5.

This dissertation explores the reception of Russian strategic narratives among Russian-speaking youth in Latvia. Bringing together media and communication studies, international relations and Baltic studies, it approaches narrative persuasion and its reception from a cultural perspective.

The primary data for this study consist of 12 focus groups and 13 individual follow-up interviews with 69 young Russian speakers aged 18–30 in Riga, Daugavpils and Liepāja between 2021 and 2022. Drawing on the conceptual framework of strategic narratives, such narratives pertaining to history, freedom of speech and language were identified and analysed in Russian foreign policy documents, press briefings and Sputnik Latvia media texts. The media ecology in which these narratives were projected and received were studied using thematic analysis, focusing on participants' media use and perception of news as a social and cultural context for the reception of narratives. Using Carolyn Michelle's reception model, participants' sensemaking of these narratives was analysed on denotative and connotative levels of meaning.

By adapting Michelle's model, this study adds affect as a factor that influences the reception of narrative texts. It demonstrates that affect serves as a force that increases narrative persuasion, pushing participants to skip denotative levels of meaning and move directly to connotative levels. It is also a force that can push a reader into a mediated mode and become critical of the text because of its emotional content. Heightened or diminished affect facilitates shifts.

Findings reveal that young Russian speakers in Latvia are a far from homogeneous group. Generally, they are neither critically opposing Russian strategic narratives nor uncritically taking them to heart. The reality is rather somewhere in between. As such, this research project brings nuance to a situation where censorship, 'us versus them' thinking, and polarisation are increasingly taking over public discourse.

Keywords: strategic narratives, persuasion, affect, reception theory, news repertoires, Latvia, Russian speakers

Emma Rönngren, Department of Informatics and Media, Kyrkogårdsg. 10, Uppsala University, SE-751 20 Uppsala, Sweden. Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Box 5514, Uppsala University, SE-751 20 Uppsala, Sweden.

© Emma Rönngren 2025

This publication is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 (CC BY NC 4.0) license.

ISSN 1651-4777

ISBN 978-91-513-2372-5

URN urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-548989 (<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-548989>)

Till morfar

Contents

Acknowledgements	11
PART I	15
1 Introduction	17
1.1 Studying narrative persuasion	19
1.2 Aim and research questions	21
1.3 Latvia in focus	22
1.3.1 A new generation of Russian speakers	23
1.3.2 Riga, Daugavpils and Liepāja	24
1.4 Thesis overview and structure	25
2 Context	26
2.1 Latvia in the twentieth century	26
2.2 Latvia's Soviet heritage	28
2.2.1 Citizenship policy	28
2.2.2 Language policy	30
2.2.3 History policy	32
2.3 Latvia's separate media ecologies	33
2.3.1 Local media in two languages	34
2.3.2 Protecting Latvia's information sphere	34
2.3.3 Welcoming independent Russian media	35
2.3.4 Russian YouTubers	37
2.4 Russia's influence in Latvia	38
2.4.1 Russia's compatriot policy	38
2.4.2 Sputnik Latvia	39
2.4.3 Following 24 February 2022	40
Concluding remarks	42
3 Theoretical framework	43
3.1 Narrative persuasion	44
3.1.1 The spectrum of persuasion	45
3.1.2 Strategising narratives	46
3.2 News media repertoires	52
3.3 The reception of narratives	55
3.3.1 Modes of reception	58
3.4 Affect and reception	63
Summary of the theoretical framework	67

4	Methodological framework	69
4.1	A social constructionist approach.....	69
4.2	Data collection methods	69
4.2.1	Foreign policy documents and media texts.....	71
4.2.2	Focus groups	73
4.2.3	Individual interviews	78
4.3	Analysis of the material.....	82
4.3.1	Analysing the documents	82
4.3.2	Analysing the interviews.....	84
4.4	Ethics and self-reflexivity.....	85
4.5	Limitations of the study	87
	PART II.....	89
5	Russian strategic narratives about Latvia.....	91
5.1	Projection of strategic narratives in Russian foreign policy.....	92
5.1.1	The Russian foreign policy concept.....	92
5.1.2	Bilateral agreements and reports.....	93
5.1.3	Official statements	94
5.2	Projection of strategic narratives in Sputnik Latvia	94
5.2.1	Attacking freedom of speech – banning Russian media.....	95
5.2.2	Reinterpreting history – glorifying Nazism	97
5.2.3	The language reform – forced assimilation	99
5.3	Sputnik Latvia’s role in narrative persuasion	101
5.4	Discussion.....	102
	Concluding remarks.....	106
6	News media repertoires and the reception of strategic narratives.....	107
6.1	General perceptions of news media.....	107
6.1.1	Critique of all news media outlets	108
6.1.2	Criteria for assessing news reporting.....	109
6.1.3	Comparing news in both languages	111
6.2	Categorisation of news media repertoires	112
6.2.1	Algorithmic users.....	113
6.2.2	Heavy users.....	114
6.2.3	Selective users.....	116
6.2.4	News avoiders	117
6.3	Navigating a polarised media ecology.....	118
6.3.1	Losing interest in Russian state-controlled media	122
6.3.2	Putting trust in Russian YouTubers	125
6.4	Discussion.....	128
	Concluding remarks.....	131

7 Making sense through modes of reception.....	133
7.1 The removal of Russian language education.....	133
7.1.1 Emotional headlines.....	134
7.1.2 Exaggeration of the problem.....	135
7.1.3 Rejection of Russian actors.....	138
7.2 The closing of Russian channels.....	140
7.2.1 Inconsistent actors.....	140
7.2.2 Relevance of the problem.....	141
7.2.3 One-sided clickbait.....	143
7.3 The ban of the St George ribbon.....	145
7.3.1 Agreement with the text.....	146
7.3.2 Diverging views of the form.....	146
7.3.3 Exclusion of information.....	148
7.4 Discussion.....	149
8 Taking positions through discursive readings.....	153
8.1 The removal of Russian language education.....	153
8.1.1 Oppositional reading – we should know Latvian.....	154
8.1.2 Dominant reading – infringement of education rights.....	156
8.1.3 Negotiated reading – both languages should coexist.....	158
8.2 The closing of Russian channels.....	160
8.2.1 Dominant reading – infringement of freedom of speech.....	161
8.2.2 Negotiated reading – it does not affect me.....	163
8.2.3 Oppositional reading – Russian TV is propagandistic.....	164
8.3 The ban of the St George ribbon.....	166
8.3.1 Dominant reading – it is a sacred symbol.....	167
8.3.2 Negotiated reading – I do not want to take a position.....	170
8.3.3 Oppositional reading – the symbol’s meaning has changed.....	172
8.4 Discussion.....	174
Concluding remarks.....	178
PART III.....	179
9 Conclusion.....	181
9.1 Summary.....	181
9.2 Contributions.....	188
9.3 Societal implications.....	190
9.4 Limitations and suggestions for future research.....	191
References.....	193
Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Press statements.....	209
Sputnik Latvia articles.....	210

Appendices	213
Appendix I: Interview guide focus groups	213
Appendix II: Interview guide follow-up interviews	215
Appendix III: Discussion material focus groups	217
Appendix IV: Advertisement.....	220
Appendix V: Survey questions for recruitment.....	221

Acknowledgements

When I grew up in the countryside, I did not know it was possible to work as a researcher in social science. I only knew I wanted to travel the world, read books and meet interesting people. Growing up, I thought I would become a foreign correspondent. Instead, I studied media and communication and Russian language and literature. It feels a little surreal to write these words, but at the same time, it feels like this dissertation was meant to be. The path that led me here was not always clear, but it was shaped by the values instilled in me by my family – a belief that I could achieve anything if I worked hard enough. Doing a PhD has not been easy. I have often doubted myself and felt that I did not fit in. Nevertheless, for five years, I woke up every morning and felt excited about my research. My passion for this project has always conquered my fears of failure.

Along the way, I have been fortunate to be surrounded by an extraordinary network of support, without which this thesis would not have been written. Thank you for your invaluable feedback on this dissertation and support during my PhD. First and foremost, I would like to thank my main supervisor, **Göran Svensson**, for your unwavering guidance and encouragement. Göran has believed in me from the beginning to the end, and his mentorship and guidance are far beyond what any doctoral student could ask for in a supervisor. For that, I am forever grateful.

I have been blessed to have two co-supervisors in two departments. To my co-supervisor, **Amanda Lagerkvist**, your pioneering work in existential media studies has truly inspired me, and I am particularly thankful for the way you introduced me to affect theory. Your sharp intellectual rigor and thoughtful guidance have been invaluable in shaping my work and academic growth. To my co-supervisor, **Matthew Kott**, your expertise as a historian and editor brought a unique and invaluable perspective to this dissertation. Your meticulous attention to detail, deep historical knowledge and cultural insights are truly impressive and have significantly enriched my work.

I want to thank **Daniel Lövgren**, **Paulina Rajkowska**, and **Peter Jakobsson** as well as **Pawel Surowiec-Capell** and **Triin Vihalemm** for reviewing earlier

drafts of this thesis during my higher seminars and providing feedback and encouragement.

Thank you to all the **participants** in my study who were so generous with their time. I am deeply grateful for their trust that made this research possible. I am grateful for the generous financial support from **the Anna-Maria Lundin Foundation** for making this empirical data collection possible. I am indebted to the kind and helpful community of scholars and local experts in Latvia. Thank you, **Nita Jirgensone**, for traveling with me to Riga, Daugavpils and Liepāja. Thank you, **Daunis Auers**, **Uldis Zupa**, and **Maija Burima** for their warm and generous hospitality during my stay at the University of Latvia and for your kind support in Liepāja and Daugavpils. I would also like to thank **the Embassy of Sweden in Riga** and **the Nordic Council of Ministers** for sharing their networks.

I feel blessed to have received different travel grants during pivotal times of my PhD project. I thank **the Jonsered Foundation** for allowing me one month of writing at Villa Martinson. I also want to thank **FSMK** for funding my participation at ICA in Toronto and **the Harald and Louise Ekman Foundation** for the stipend that allowed one week of writing at the Sigtuna Foundation. Parts of this thesis were also written at **the Swedish House in Kavala** and **the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul**. Thank you, **Ammon Cheskin**, for the interesting talks and guidance during my Erasmus exchange at the University of Glasgow.

To my colleagues at the Department of Informatics and Media, thank you for creating such a welcoming atmosphere, Tomas Eklund, Jenny Eriksson Lundström, Michał Krzyżanowski, Therese Monstad, Carina Boson, Eva Enefjord, Anna Henriksson, Eva Karlsson, Tina Kekkonen, Lotta Lundell, Cecilia Nygren, Klara Runesson, Sophie Skogehall and Christian Sandström. Thank you to my media and communication colleagues Ylva Ekström, Kristin Karlsson, Johan Lindell, Cecilia Strand, Matilda Tudor and Claes Thorén. I would also like to thank Owen Eriksson and Maria Normark for their assistance as directors of PhD studies.

I am very privileged to be part of the Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies. Thank you, Claes Levinsson, Katarina Israelsson, Jevgenija Gehsbarga and Mattias Vesterlund, for creating such a vibrant research center and hosting the best parties! Thank you to my research colleagues Mark Bassin, Matthew Blackburn, Maria Eckerdal, Elias Götz, Zakhar Ishov, Hele Kiiman, Martin Kragh, Michael Loader, Johanna Ohlsson, Paraskevi Palivani, Susanna Rabow-Edling, Emma Rimpiläinen, Ann-Marie Sätre, Igor Torbakov, Vladislava Vladimirova, Michael Watson-Conneely and Susanne Wengle. Thanks for being such good colleagues.

To my former PhD colleagues Siddharth Chadha, Yiming Chen, Kirill Filimonov, Cristina Ghita, Katerina Linden, Shweta Premanandan, Martin Stojanov and Laia Turmo Vidal, thank you for showing the way. For my present colleagues, all the best in your future PhD journey; Oskar Berggren, Pedro Camelo, Caroline Hill, Soraya Hossain, Martin Lindstam, Maria Rogg, Lauren Richter, Beatrice Tylstedt, Aliaksandra Shrubok, Ausra Padskoci-maite, Anastasia Ulturgasheva and Yanthe Zebregs. A special thank you to **Kateryna Boyko, Sandra Bergman** and **Alexandra Brankova**. The bond between PhD students who start together is unique. Few truly ‘get it’ like they do. They share the highs and lows, from imposter syndrome and tough feedback to the joy of a breakthrough or getting a paragraph just right.

Looking back on this journey, I am especially thankful for James Pamment at Lund University, who encouraged me to pursue a career in academic research when I was still a master’s student. Thank you for showing me that research can be fun, inspiring and interesting. I would also like to thank my former colleagues at Campus Helsingborg, Rickard Andersson, Cecilia Axwinge, Scott Burnett, Cecilia Cassinger, Asta Cepaite Nilsson, Jörgen Eksell, Alicia Fjällhed, Jesper Falkheimer, Nils Gustafsson, Mats Heide, Tamara Landia, Marie Ledendal, Ilkin Mehrabov, Henrik Merkelsen, Agneta Moulettes, Maria Månsson, Howard Nothhaft, Camilla Nothhaft, Lena Rolén, Maria Rosén, Charlotte Simonsson, Martina Smedberg, Leysan Storie, Åsa Thelander, Marlene Wiggill, Hui Zhao and Marja Åkerström.

I extend my gratitude to the students I have had the privilege of teaching during this time. Teaching you has been a constant source of inspiration, reminding me of the importance of critical inquiry and dialogue in academia.

Lastly, I want to thank my family and friends for their unwavering support and belief in me, notwithstanding their bewilderment that it is possible to be a student for so long. To my husband **David**, who has endured my late nights, long hours and endless discussions about my research – I cannot express how grateful I am for your love and support. Thank you for reminding me that there are other things more important than academia. I am truly fortunate to have you by my side.

Uppsala, February 2025.

Emma Rönngren

PART I

1 Introduction

“My city’s being shelled, but my mum won’t believe me. It really scared me when my mum exactly quoted Russian TV. They are just brainwashing people. And people trust them.” This quote by Oleksandra, a 25-year-old woman in Kharkiv, Ukraine, was published in a BBC interview at the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. She was sending videos from her heavily bombarded hometown in Ukraine to her mother, who lives in Moscow, Russia (Korenyuk & Goodman, 2022). How could they have such different perceptions of reality, to the point that the mother did not believe the videos her daughter was sending her?

In times of war, narratives projected via the media can become powerful tools for shaping public opinion and mobilising societies. In Russia, state-controlled media outlets have, for a long time, projected narratives that target Russian speakers in Russia and former Soviet republics. Relying heavily on such sources, individuals may adopt a worldview consistent with the narrative messages projected by the media. This example shows the generational rift among Russian speakers, where older generations often retain cultural and emotional ties to Soviet-era narratives. Meanwhile, young Russian speakers engage with diverse and transnational media sources where they encounter competing narratives. While the example of Oleksandra and her mother is an extreme case, it vividly illustrates the affective thrust of the phenomenon of propaganda and media persuasion in our time.

Official responses concerning Russian media strategies have also used strong language. In a tweet posted three days after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, described the Russian state-controlled media outlets RT and Sputnik as both harmful and toxic:

... we will ban the Kremlin’s media machine in the EU. The state-owned Russia Today and Sputnik, and their subsidiaries, will no longer be able to spread their lies to justify Putin’s war. We are developing tools to ban their toxic and harmful disinformation in Europe. (Ursula von der Leyen, 27 February 2022)

The response from the EU was thus immediate, and the language used was high-strung and emotive. As a result of the war, the state-controlled Russian media channels RT and Sputnik were suspended in the EU (Council of the

EU, 2022). The war effectively ended Russian state-controlled media in the EU.

Latvia, a former Soviet republic that has been a member of both the EU and NATO since 2004, has a long history of banning Russian state-controlled media, particularly following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. Latvia has a significant Russian-speaking minority, with 37 per cent of the population reporting Russian as their first language (mother tongue). For the Russian government, Latvia's Russian-speaking minority is seen as both a target group of pro-Russian messages and an instrument for influencing public opinion (Cheskin, 2015). Many Russian speakers in Latvia, both young and old, also rely on Russian media channels for news. Latvian authorities have warned about Russia's hostile information influence for years, as its Russian-speaking population has been considered receptive to Russia's policies due to their use of Russian media channels.

Russia's use of the media and the role of RT and Sputnik, both in Russia and abroad, have been discussed by academics and practitioners for the past ten years. While they and other pundits often have accused Russia of waging an information war, it is clear that the Russian leadership themselves also think of information as a weapon, as stated in their information security doctrine (Archetti, 2019; Szostek, 2020). While there is no doubt that Russia's use of information can have harmful effects on democratic societies, the information warfare discourse leaves little room for a nuanced understanding of how persuasion works in the twenty-first century (Archetti, 2019; Chernobrov & Briant, 2022; Szostek, 2020; Wanless & Pamment, 2019). The likening of information to a weapon simplifies the communication process and exaggerates the degree of control that communicators exert over the communicative process and its outcomes. Instead, more research is needed to understand the ways in which persuasion works in a hybrid media ecology where traditional media, social media and digital platforms converge.

Over the past five years, there have been numerous studies on Russia's projection of strategic narratives as part of an information war (Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2020; Deverell et al., 2020; Fridrichová, 2023; Grigor [Khaldarova] & Pantti, 2021; Hoyle et al., 2023; Khaldarova, 2021; Wagnsson & Barzanje, 2021; Wagnsson & Lundström, 2023). Strategic narratives are purposeful stories constructed and communicated by actors to influence public opinion and achieve different policy objectives (Miskimmon et al., 2013). They persuade by engaging our emotions in a way that discourages us from critical evaluation. In polarised societies, strategic narratives can be particularly persuasive. The reach of persuasive stories is amplified, creating opportunities for disinformation and propaganda to thrive.

What is lacking in previous literature on Russian strategic narratives are consistent analyses of what makes these narratives strategic and in what ways they can persuade a target audience. The section below reviews the literature

related to the core topic of this thesis: narrative persuasion and the reception of strategic narratives.

1.1 Studying narrative persuasion

Human beings are storytellers. We understand and make sense of the world by telling stories, and we use narratives to structure information and construct our identities (Fisher, 1985; White, 1973). Narratives use plots to make sense of events, where a mixture of facts, half-truths and exaggerations are combined to create a plausible version of reality (Colley, 2020). The coherence of narratives makes them less likely to be challenged and harder to refute, especially when they engage us emotionally. In an increasingly complicated world, such narratives are attractive as they connect the past, present and future to a meaningful whole.

Russia has been accused of weaponising narratives through what has been termed ‘antagonistic narration’ (Wagnsson & Barzanje, 2021), which is increasingly connected to information warfare and deemed effective and dangerous by, for example, the EU. In the concrete context of Latvia, however, how persuasive are such narratives? Strategic narratives have gained popularity in international relations and in media and communications to study how actors use narratives consciously and deliberately to persuade and to influence public opinion. Such narratives have been analysed on three levels: formation, projection and reception. Formation addresses how narratives are formed and involves understanding actors’ strategic goals and types of communication. Projection addresses how narratives are disseminated as well as challenged and contested, particularly in a new media environment. Reception addresses how narratives are received.

There is a growing research interest in studying the reception of strategic narratives. As it is not enough to use polling data based on simple questions about whether people feel positively or negatively about a policy or a country (Roselle, 2017), a number of studies have explored the reception of strategic narratives at greater depth. Focusing on narrative structure, Ringsmose and Børgesen (2011) suggest that a narrative needs to be coherent and consistent to resonate. If a narrative is altered and changed too often, it will lose credibility. On the other hand, Wagnsson and Lundström (2023) found that a narrative can persuade people even when a text is incoherent. They also conclude that people can be persuaded by a narrative without having personal experience of the topic, as also has been found by other research (Hoyle et al., 2021; Hoyle, Powell, et al., 2024; Hoyle, Wagnsson, et al., 2024). Szostek (2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2018) and Archetti (2015), however, found that if an individual has personal experience of a narrative, chances increase that the strategic narrative will resonate. Other studies suggest that people will be more susceptible to strategic narratives if they resonate with collective identity, political myths

and the individual's understanding of the world (Colley, 2017; Edenborg, 2022; Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019, 2021; Hudson, 2015; Khaldarova, 2021; Schmitt, 2018).

As far as can be discerned, previous studies disagree about which aspects of social reality make a narrative compelling. Miskimmon and O'Loughlin (2019) explored why some narratives stick more than others and found that participants' narratives closely reflected the narratives present in national media and elite discourse. Their findings suggest the importance of identity narratives embedded in national public spheres. They also emphasise the importance of how the international system is presented in the media and how media use influences participants' narratives. Their findings can partly illustrate why Szostek (2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2018) found that students spontaneously reproduced the overarching strategic narrative that state-controlled television conveys while describing Russian state-controlled television as propagandistic. The contradictory finding of believing the message while disbelieving the messenger calls for further research on reception that includes questions about media use. Previous studies' varying and sometimes conflicting results and findings point to the complexity of narrative persuasiveness.

In a Baltic context, Cheskin (2013, 2015) has extensively studied the securitisation of Latvia's Russian-speaking minority using focus groups and discourse analysis of media texts to study Russian speakers' identity. Combining focus groups and interviews with Russian speakers in Estonia and Latvia, Vihalemm, Juzefovičs and Leppik (2019) have found that the depiction of Russian speakers as pro-Russia is only partly justified and that their media consumption patterns are far from uniform (Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2020). Other studies suggest that Russian speakers in Latvia do subscribe to Russia's geopolitical narratives (Kaprāns & Juzefovičs, 2020; Kaprāns & Mieraņa, 2019a, 2019b; Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2023). Whether this also holds true for a younger generation of Russian speakers in Latvia remains unclear.

Given the impact of recent societal developments on Russian speakers in Latvia and the mixed results from previous studies, more research is needed that focuses specifically on how young Russian speakers in Latvia make sense of Russian strategic narratives. They have a unique position as they on the one hand inherit linguistic and cultural ties from their families and communities while they on the other hand have tools to challenge or reinterpret those inherited narratives as they encounter competing narratives. Since individuals have agency and (re)interpret narratives, there is a need for a sophisticated and multifaceted approach to reception (Archetti, 2013, 2017). Furthermore, the heterogeneity and individual agency in what people watch, read and believe calls for the inclusion of media use in studying the reception of strategic narratives. This study seeks to extend and build upon previous research on the reception of strategic narratives in general and how young Russian speakers in Latvia make sense of them in particular.

In this context, studying how audiences make sense of narratives is not merely an academic endeavour but a societal imperative. It offers the potential of deepening our understanding of how narratives shape public opinion and influence collective action in times of crisis. Without such research, we risk underestimating the powers set in motion, overlooking the lived experiences of young Russian speakers. Furthermore, a lack of insight into reception could lead to ineffective policy responses, as they might fail to resonate with diverse audiences or fail to address the root causes of narrative divides. This study aims to fill this gap, contributing to the strategic narrative framework and reception theory as well as to the practical challenge of creating informed, resilient societies in a time of geopolitical conflict.

This study uses Michelle's (2007) multidimensional model of reception to explore the process of making sense of strategic narratives. Through focus group interviews and individual follow-up interviews, this study explores how young Russian speakers make sense of three Russian strategic narratives pertaining to history, freedom of speech and language projected through Sputnik Latvia between 2019 and 2021. Analysing the sensemaking process as moving between different modes of reception consisting of denotative and connotative levels of meaning, this study includes affect theory and the role of emotions (Ahmed, 2004b; Papacharissi, 2014) to describe such moves in a Baltic context where actors exploit occurring grievances in Latvian society.

Against this background, the following section presents this thesis' specific aim, research questions and contributions.

1.2 Aim and research questions

The overarching research problem in this study concerns the use of narratives for persuasion and, more specifically, what makes strategic narratives persuasive in this context and in what ways they are able to persuade a target audience. This study aims to explore how young Russian speakers in Latvia make sense of strategic narratives projected by Sputnik Latvia. To achieve this aim, I seek to answer the following main research question:

What form does the reception of Russian strategic narratives among Russian-speaking youth take in Latvia?

To answer this research question, I will raise and seek to answer the following sub-questions:

- 1) How are Russian strategic narratives about Latvia projected in Sputnik Latvia?

- 2) In what ways do young Russian speakers in Latvia perceive and navigate the media ecology in which these strategic narratives are projected?
- 3) Given the media context, what reception modes are prevalent among young Russian speakers and how are they linked to a) the mapped media repertoires and, in turn, to b) position taking in relation to the strategic narratives?

The first two questions pertain to projection: the first is an examination of the Russian strategic narratives about Latvia formulated by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and projected via Sputnik Latvia. The second question explores young Russian speakers' perception of media and their news media use as a context for the projection and reception of narratives in which Russian strategic narratives compete with Latvian and other counter-narratives. The third question pertains to the reception of specific strategic narratives and will be answered in Chapters 7 and 8, which constitute the core of the dissertation. This question analyses the participants' reception of the Russian strategic narratives using a multidimensional reception model. The analysis shows how different positions are taken by focusing on denotative and connotative levels of meaning. It analyses the role of emotions in this reception process while relating these positions to media repertoires.

1.3 Latvia in focus

This study of Latvia focuses on how a new generation of young Russian speakers uses media and makes sense of strategic narratives projected by Sputnik Latvia. Latvia provides an interesting research area to study strategic narratives for a number of reasons. One is Russia's communication towards post-Soviet states and Russian-speaking minorities, where the media has played a significant role (Tolz & Teper, 2018).

Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania are unique among the former Soviet republics because they joined the EU and NATO in 2004. They are, however, seen as vulnerable to Russia's policies of compatriot protection because of their Russian-speaking minorities. Russia has recently sought to articulate and pursue a coherent policy towards the group of individuals it refers to as 'Russian compatriots' (*rossiiskie sootchestvenniki*). The Russian Federation stands out globally as a significant agent of kin-state nationalism. In recent years, Russian authorities have directed substantial resources towards kin-state activities and codified Russian-speaking compatriots as central elements of the nation's assertive foreign policy (Cheskin & Kachuyevski, 2019). Such was the case in Georgia in 2008 and has been in Ukraine since 2014, where the protection of compatriots is being used to justify the use of hard military means (Pieper,

2020; Suslov, 2018), which culminated in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Another example is the strict language laws introduced in Latvia to restrict the public use of Russian in the country, where this linguistic identification has been used to link various Russian-speaking groups under a shared discourse of language discrimination. As a result, Russian-speaking identities are stronger in Latvia than in, for example, Ukraine and Kazakhstan (Kosmarskaya, 2011). International actors such as the OSCE, EU and UN and Western nations tend to see Russian speakers as an undifferentiated and constant group (Kaprāns & Mieriņa, 2019b). While several scholars have questioned the idea of Russian speakers in Latvia as a homogeneous group (Cheskin & Kachuyevski, 2019; Kaprāns & Juzefovičs, 2020; Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2023), Russian speakers do share a common, potentially unifying, communicative base: the Russian language and an interest in Russian media (Vihalemm et al., 2019).

1.3.1 A new generation of Russian speakers

For the past 30 years, since Latvia gained independence, a new generation of Russian speakers has grown up under the influence of both Russian media and Western popular culture. Compared to their parents and grandparents, this new generation is more integrated into Latvian society and more likely to perceive themselves as Latvian. Having spent their entire lives in independent Latvia, they do not necessarily identify with the Russian state and have somewhat mixed identities (Persson, 2014). They do, however, feel the shortcomings of societal integration and insufficient political representation based on their ethnic identity and are involuntarily politicised, instrumentalised and securitised by both Russia and Latvia.

In recent years, young Russian speakers in Latvia have received increasing attention from scholars and analysts (Bērziņa et al., 2023; Birka, 2016; Breggin, 2014; Ekmanis, 2019; Hercberga, 2023; Lisenkov & Kugel, 2021; Tkačenko, 2023). While most previous studies have focused on Russian speakers' identity and integration into Latvian society, there is a need to further explore young Russian speakers' media use and how they perceive Russian attempts at information influence. Young Russian speakers are important to study as they tend to put themselves in different contexts and have distinctly different views of their own country than other actors in the post-Soviet space. They also typically engage with a variety of different media and expose themselves to different ideas (Chaban et al., 2021).

From a media studies perspective, youth are interesting as they have grown up in a digital environment and are used to living in a high-choice media environment (Edgerly et al., 2018). They spend far more time with newer, unconventional forms of news than older generations, which were socialised with more traditional forms of news (Bolin, 2017; Geers, 2020). Youth also

tend to see news as a ‘free’ resource, meaning they are less willing to pay for journalism (Peters et al., 2022). Media practices established during formative years likely settle as people grow older (Bengtsson & Johansson, 2024).

The young Russian speakers who participated in this study were 18 to 30 years of age, lived in Latvia and self-identified as Russian speakers. Previous studies show that the period of being 18–30 years old is most important in forming political attitudes and identities (Bengtsson & Johansson, 2024; Neundorf et al., 2013) and should be considered highly relevant for a government’s influence activities. They represent the future generation of a population that Russia would like to claim as its compatriots, and they will likely influence Latvia’s relations with Russia in the years to come. Russia often opportunistically counts Russian speakers among its compatriots, whatever their relationship to other categories may be, or simply those with a cultural or spiritual connection with Russia (Ryazanova-Clarke, 2017; Suslov, 2018).

In this study, I will argue for the heterogeneity of this group and illustrate more vividly the complexity of the feelings found among different voices of young Russian speakers in Latvia.

1.3.2 Riga, Daugavpils and Liepāja

The three cities of Riga, Daugavpils and Liepāja were chosen as research sites for three reasons: they are the three largest cities in Latvia, have a high concentration of Russian speakers and historical connections to Russia due to their Soviet past.

Riga is the capital and home to many Russian speakers. Walking down the street, you will likely hear both Russian and Latvian being spoken. Riga is home to many of Latvia’s higher education institutions. The capital has long been a site of Russian cultural and economic influence. For nearly a decade (2009–2019), Riga was governed by Nils Ušakovs, the first ethnic Russian mayor of the city, representing Latvia’s largest Russian speakers’ party, Harmony (Saskaņa).

Daugavpils is Latvia’s second-largest city and is situated in south-eastern Latvia in the Latgale region. This region has a relatively high Russian-speaking population and is close to the borders of Belarus, Lithuania and Russia. Many ethnic Russians emigrated during the Soviet era, but the earliest Russian emigres belonged to the Old Believers community, which split from the Russian Orthodox Church in the seventeenth century. Daugavpils has often been indicated as the potential next target for Russia, as it is considered the most Russophone region of Latvia (Kaprāns & Juzefovičs, 2020; Volkovs & Kurczewski, 2013). About 80 per cent of Daugavpils’ inhabitants speak Russian at home. Daugavpils has informally obtained the moniker ‘Little Russia’ within Latvia, as few people in Daugavpils speak Latvian, and it is considered a city of questionable loyalty (Ekmanis, 2019). During the 2012 referendum on making Russian the second official language, only 15 per cent of

Daugavpils' residents opposed the initiative. In contrast, about 75 per cent of Latvian citizens voted against the proposal (Duvold et al., 2019).

Liepāja is the third-largest city after Riga and Daugavpils and is located in western Latvia by the Baltic Sea. Following the Soviet occupation, Liepāja became a strategically important naval base for the Russian Baltic Fleet and was made a closed city (Eglins-Eglitis & Lusena-Ezera, 2016). Its population has declined since the withdrawal of Soviet military forces, of which the last left the city in 1994. Some Russian forces were, however, still allowed to remain at the Skrunda radar base until 1998. In addition, many ethnic Russians emigrated to Russia between 1991 and 2000.

1.4 Thesis overview and structure

The study consists of nine chapters with three main parts.

PART I begins with *Chapter 1* and introduces the study. *Chapter 2* presents the country-specific context for the analysis in this dissertation. It describes the Latvian context for the three Russian strategic narratives identified and analysed in this thesis, as well as the Latvian media ecology. *Chapter 3* is devoted to the theoretical framework, which combines the strategic narrative framework with reception theory, where the concept of news media repertoires is used for the projection and reception of strategic narratives. Affect theory is included to understand the sensemaking process better. *Chapter 4* presents the methodological framework, which combines the analysis of narratives in policy documents and media texts with focus group and individual interviews with young Russian speakers in Riga, Daugavpils and Liepāja. The sensemaking process is analysed using a multidimensional reception model. News media repertoires are identified using thematic analysis.

PART II begins with *Chapter 5*, which addresses the first sub-question of how Russian strategic narratives are projected in Russia's foreign policy documents and Sputnik Latvia texts. *Chapter 6* focuses on the second sub-question and explores young Russian speakers' news media repertoires and perception of media. *Chapter 7* begins to answer the third sub-question and presents the reception modes prevalent among young Russian speakers, focusing on a denotative level of reception. *Chapter 8* brings in a connotative level of reception and describes which positions participants take in relation to the three strategic narratives.

PART III concludes the thesis with *Chapter 9*, summarising the main conclusions. The chapter discusses how strategic narratives are persuasive and in what ways they are able to persuade a target audience. The chapter ends with critical reflections on the study, in which suggestions for further research are made.

2 Context

This chapter provides the broader social and cultural context for this study, especially for readers unfamiliar with Russia's relationship with the Baltic nations in general and with Latvia in particular. It does not, however, intend to provide a detailed presentation of the history of Latvia or its relationship with Russia, but rather a brief overview of the relationship, primarily focusing on the twentieth century, to give context and meaning to the current geopolitical situation, the Russian (and Latvian) narratives and the discussions of the focus group participants. The understanding and perception of history, especially during and immediately after World War II, plays an integral part in the relation between Russia and Latvia today. The first section briefly summarises the historical relationship between Latvia and Russia. In the second section, Latvia's policies regarding the Russian-speaking minority are presented. The third and fourth sections describe Russia's influence in Latvia, focusing on the Latvian media ecology. The chapter ends with a summary.

2.1 Latvia in the twentieth century

Latvia has been caught in the tug of war between Russia and great Western powers for centuries. The twentieth century threw Latvia into a revolution, two world wars, freedom struggles and several foreign occupations (Kasekamp, 2010; Plakans, 1995, 2011). For the greater part of the period since the eighteenth century, Latvia has been within the Russian sphere of interest, where the Russian tsars imposed Russification policies on Latvia. Following the Russian Revolution, Latvia declared its independence on 18 November 1918¹ and was recognised as the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic by Soviet Russia and Germany in 1920 (Auers, 2015; Clarke, 2023; Duvold et al., 2019; Kott & Smith, 2020; Loader et al., 2022).

Democratic coalitions governed independent Latvia until 1934, when autocratic rule was established. Latvia was forced to grant the Soviet Union military bases on its soil. On 17 June 1940, in conformity with the terms of the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact, the Soviet Red Army moved into Riga. The parliamentary election and petition in the summer of 1940 for Latvia to be accepted

¹ This is an important date as Latvia counts 1918 as its date of birth; see section 2.2.1 Citizenship policy.

as a Soviet republic was designed to give the annexation an air of legitimacy. According to Duvold, Berglund and Ekman (2019), the official Soviet news agency announced the results of the election 12 hours before the closing of the polling stations. Therefore, most Western countries maintained the position that the Soviet occupation was illegal and refused to recognise it *de jure*. The Soviet authorities compensated for their lack of popular support by promoting a climate of fear and terror, including political arrests and mass deportations.

In 1941, Germany broke the non-aggression pact and invaded the Soviet Union (Lumans, 2006). Latvians at first saw German soldiers as liberators from the horrors of the Soviet terror. As a result, many Latvians joined forces with the Germans in their military campaign against the Soviet Union. During this time, a voluntary Latvian SS Legion was formed. It was presented as a voluntary action, but the volunteer warriors were in the minority. Disobeying the mobilisation would lead to severe punishment. Latvians were also recruited into the Armed Forces of the USSR, which meant that Latvians had to fight on both sides of the occupation forces (Kudors, 2023, p. 49). Nazi Germany occupied Latvia from 1941 until 1944 when the Soviet Army re-entered Latvian territory, which prompted an exodus of refugees.

The deportations and executions during German and Soviet expansionism resulted in the loss of about 30 per cent of the population in Latvia between 1941 and 1945. In their place, the Soviet military and their families came to the country, as did Russians and other nationalities to work in industrial jobs. The Soviet industrialisation programme and the accompanying flow of migrants from Russia after World War II dramatically impacted the ethnic composition of Latvia. Interwar Latvia was a relatively homogeneous nation-state with 75.5 per cent Latvians (Cherson & Estes, 2023; Grigas, 2016), and in 1989, the proportion of Latvians had decreased to 52 per cent (Bērziņa et al., 2023). Latvia's farms were forcibly collectivised in 1949, and more than 44 000 people were deported to Siberia for refusing collectivisation. Many of them were ethnic Latvians.

The death of Stalin in 1953 and the de-Stalinisation process initiated by his successor Khrushchev contributed to a normalisation of sorts, and deportees who were still alive after years in Siberia were gradually allowed to return (Grigas, 2016). Latvia's economy was booming in the 1950s and 1960s. Latvia was seen as a favourable destination for its appealing nature and notable capital investments from the USSR (The Embassy of the Republic of Latvia to the United States of America, 2014). Russia often emphasises this period, describing the Soviet period in Latvia as a period of socio-economic prosperity (Bērziņa et al., 2023).

During the Perestroika initiated by Gorbachev in the late 1980s, Latvians began to seek a declared restoration of their independence. In 1989, the Baltic Way manifestation was held throughout the Baltics, in which thousands of protesters joined their hands and formed a human chain from Tallinn to Riga to Vilnius. Latvia attained full independence from the Soviet Union on 21

August 1991. The armed forces of the Russian Federation, however, did not leave the territory of Latvia until 1994, with a contingent remaining at the Skrunda radar base until 1998. Latvia quickly reoriented itself politically and economically towards Western Europe and was, together with Estonia and Lithuania, one of the only former Soviet Republics to turn down membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and other Russian-dominated regional integrationist initiatives.

In 2000, Latvia began negotiations for accession to the European Union. Russia actively opposed Latvia's efforts to join NATO. For example, in 1997, the Russian government offered the three Baltic states security guarantees in exchange for abandoning their plans to join NATO. All three nations swiftly rejected the offer (Auers, 2015), and Latvia became an EU and NATO member in 2004. Tensions between Latvia and Russia have persisted into the twenty-first century. Russia has been reluctant to treat former Soviet states as foreign states, instead labelling them collectively as 'the near abroad' (Auers, 2015; Duvold et al., 2019).

2.2 Latvia's Soviet heritage

Latvia inherited various elements from the Soviet Union that affect both Latvia's relationship with Russia today and its Russian-speaking minority. This section will briefly address issues concerning citizenship and language policies as well as the interpretation of history that serve as important foundations for Russia's strategic narratives about Latvia, as described in Chapter 5.

2.2.1 Citizenship policy

When Latvia regained its independence in 1991, the Latvian government was keen on distancing itself from Russia after centuries of Russian domination. The proportion of ethnic Latvians had decreased to 52 per cent, mainly due to the mass immigration of Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians during the Soviet period. Most did not speak Latvian, had weak ties with Latvian society and culture and had considerable sympathies towards the Russian Federation.

The Russian-speaking minority, which constituted a majority in most of the larger cities, was seen as a threat to Latvian democracy. The political elite opted for the exclusion of the Soviet-era immigrants (as well as their descendants) from automatic citizenship, which affected the position and size of the Russian-speaking minority. Only citizens of interwar Latvia and their descendants were given automatic citizenship (Ijabs, 2016; Karklins, 2021). The decision meant that people who immigrated to Latvia during the Soviet period needed to apply for naturalisation, even if they were born in Latvia or had been living there for many years. The core argument was that Latvia had been annexed and occupied by the Soviet Union, and therefore, the immigration that took place

during these 50 years should be seen as illegal. Many nationalists even wanted to force Soviet-era immigrants to leave, whereas others saw this as an improbable and impractical solution (Duvold et al., 2019).

Latvia today considers itself to be the legal continuation of the sovereign state whose first independence dates back to 1918. Latvian authorities do not accept any legal connection with the former Latvian SSR, which had been occupied and annexed into the USSR 1940–1941 and 1944–1991, because Soviet Russia had renounced its territorial claims to Latvian territory ‘for all time’ in the 1920 peace treaty with Latvia. Russia, on the other hand, maintains that the Soviet annexation of Latvia was legitimate and that the Soviet troops entered into Latvia in 1940 with the consent of the Latvian government. Russia also maintains that the USSR was not in a state of war and, therefore, the word occupation cannot be used. As a result, Russia wants to treat 1991 as Year Zero in its relations with the Baltic states, as if the treaty with the state it claims to be the successor of no longer is an issue (Cheskin, 2023; Duvold et al., 2019; Kudors, 2014).

One consequence of Latvia’s citizenship policy is the phenomenon of so-called non-citizens, *nepilsoņi*. According to Latvian law, non-citizens are individuals who are not citizens of Latvia or any other country and have the right to a non-citizen passport issued by the Latvian government. Non-citizens are not stateless but cannot work in government or participate in national and local elections. The citizenship law and Russian minority rights immediately became a source of contention, especially during the negotiation between Latvia and Russia over the withdrawal of Soviet troops in the first years of independence. Russia repeatedly linked the withdrawal of the Soviet military to the well-being of Russian speakers and demanded legislation safeguarding their rights. Given that Russia had about 130 000 troops stationed in the Baltic states at the time, it could have turned out somewhat differently (Duvold et al., 2019).

From a Latvian perspective, the sheer size of the Russian-speaking population made for a cautious integration strategy. While independence was supported by 73 per cent of Latvians regardless of their ethnic origins, and there were Latvian Russians who actively worked towards it, the Russian community in Latvia mobilised against Latvian independence. Therefore, the naturalisation procedures were not just intended to gradually integrate new citizens culturally and promote their loyalty to the Latvian state but also to secure the liberal-democratic and pro-Western development of the nation, as there was a fear of being outvoted by the Russian-speaking minority (Grigas, 2016). According to Ijabs (2016), this policy placed the political power and influence in the hands of the ethnic Latvian political elite and deeply influenced nation-building policies. Even though the goal was not to institute permanent ethnic dominance, the exclusionary nature of the policy hardened the ethnic boundaries between groups and caused resentment. Latvia has, for this reason, been called an ‘ethnic democracy’ (Mieriņa, 2024).

Despite changes in the 1990s and 2000s that relaxed the naturalisation requirements, the citizenship issue persisted, and the process of exclusion generated enormous grievances in the Russian-speaking community (Patsiurko & Wallace, 2014). In 2023, however, the number of people with non-citizen status in Latvia had dropped to 175 000, representing about 9 per cent of the total population (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Latvia, 2023). This is a significant decrease from 270 000 in 2022, a 35 per cent reduction in just one year following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which significantly increased the interest in acquiring Latvian citizenship via naturalisation.

The number of non-citizens is relatively small and in decline, and it persists mainly among the older generation who cannot or choose not to meet the citizenship requirement of passing a Latvian language exam. The number of non-citizens, however, is problematic as it limits the individual's rights to participate in the political process, impacts employment opportunities and complicates the integration process into the welfare system (Aasland & Fløtten, 2001; Birka, 2016). Until 2021, children born to parents who are non-citizens in Latvia were entitled to citizenship only upon request by one or both parents (Eng.lsm.lv, 2019).

2.2.2 Language policy

Besides citizenship, the language question continues to play an important role in Latvian society. The official language in Latvia is Latvian. All other languages, including Russian, are defined as foreign languages, even though Russian is spoken by roughly 37 per cent of the population. The idea that language equals the nation is seen as the core of the Latvian language policy. However, critics point out that Russian speakers in Latvia constitute one of the largest linguistic minorities in Europe. Latvia's language laws are thus denying Russophones their language rights, contrary to international practice in minority rights.

On 18 February 2012, a language referendum was held in Latvia, where a large majority rejected constitutional amendments that would make Russian the second state language. The participation rate in the referendum was 71.1 per cent, and only 17 per cent of eligible voters voted in favour. Critics pointed out that non-citizens, many of whom were Russian speakers, could not vote (Ijabs, 2016; Kudors, 2014). While Russian speakers involved in organising the referendum pointed to Latvian ethnic 'totalitarianism' wanting to deprive Russian families of their children, Latvians considered the fact that the majority of Russian speakers did not recognise Latvian as the only state language in Latvia as "a sign of the disintegration of Latvian society that might jeopardize the very existence of independent, democratic Latvia" (Ijabs, 2016, p. 298).

The language issue is most prevalent in the education system. Latvia inherited a bilingual education system from the Soviet Union, with instruction in both Latvian and Russian. An education reform was passed in 1998 and

originally envisaged all state-funded schools moving to all instruction being carried out in Latvian by 2004. The education reform led to mass protests especially among Russian speakers, who increasingly defined themselves by their use of the Russian language, calling it forced assimilation. As a result, a compromise was reached where 60 per cent of instruction in state-funded secondary schools would be conducted in Latvian, with the remaining 40 per cent being free to be conducted in the language of the minority group (Hogan-Brun, 2006, 2007).

Experts state that this decision exacerbated the tendency for language to become one of Latvia's most important markers of ethnic identity. In 2004, the Russian language suddenly became the one thing that provided a basis for group mobilisation. It provided the opportunity to highlight language discrimination as a negative means to promote the identity of Russian speakers. During this time, the term 'Russian speaker' became a linguistic signifier of choice for journalists and politicians (Cheskin, 2012; Hogan-Brun, 2006). In 2004, the Russian government started to pay more attention to the role of Russian language groups abroad, creating the Agency for Compatriots Living Abroad as a division of the foreign ministry, which will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

In 2018, the Latvian government agreed to begin a gradual transition to Latvian as the only language of instruction in schools, a transition that should have been completed in 2021/2022. This decision meant that all core subjects would be taught in Latvian, 80 per cent compared to the previous 60 per cent, and the last three years of high school would be taught entirely in Latvian. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, it was decided that the process of gradual transition should be faster, and by September 2025, all pupils will be trained in Latvian and follow a uniform programme (Eng.lsm.lv, 2022a).

For Latvian speakers, the language reform is a matter of preserving the Latvian language as part of their cultural heritage. For Russian speakers, it is seen as discriminatory, because instruction in languages of the European Union (such as German, French and Swedish) can continue. Russia has participated in several cases of complaints against Latvia in the European Union, the Council of Europe, the European Court of Human Rights, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the United Nations to support the rights of the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia (Duvold et al., 2019). However, Russia has instrumentalised the critique of these language policies to tactically discredit Latvia in the eyes of their European partners rather than take actions to assist the Russian-speaking minority (Kudors, 2014).

In recent years, new language laws in Latvia have made it illegal for job advertisements to require applicants to speak Russian. Using Russian at airports, train stations and several commercial establishments has also been prohibited. When and where it is appropriate to use the Russian language in Latvia, given both the historical context and the current regime of the

Russian government and military in Ukraine, is an ongoing topic for debate (Eng.lsm.lv, 2024b).

2.2.3 History policy

Besides citizenship and language policies, the interpretation of historical events also presents a breeding ground for conflict in contemporary Latvia–Russia relations. From the official Latvian perspective, the Soviet Union brutally occupied and tyrannised Latvia through thousands of deportations and with a targeted and ruthless policy of Russification, which involved the relocation of hundreds of thousands of Russian speakers to the republic. Latvia, together with Estonia and Lithuania, insists that Russia must apologise for the Soviet incorporation of the republics. From the official Russian perspective, the heroic role of the Red Army in liberating Latvia from fascism is emphasised. Russia also maintains that the term ‘occupation’ cannot be used as a legal assessment of the situation (Cheskin 2013; Duvold et al., 2019).

These two standpoints clash in the perception and interpretation of Victory Day on 9 May, which to Russians is a source of pride and patriotism and celebrated as having liberated territories from fascism (Gorelov, 2020; Onken, 2007), while Latvians see it as having traded one repressive regime for another. One important symbol connected to Victory Day is the St George ribbon, a striped black and orange ribbon – originally part of the tsarist-era Order of St George, reinstated in post-Soviet Russia by Boris Yeltsin in 1998 – that on its own has been used in Russia since 2005 as a symbol of Soviet victory in World War II (Kolstø, 2016). The war in Ukraine has changed the attitude towards wearing the symbol, and the ribbon has, since Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, become a symbol of Russian aggression and Russian imperialism in Latvia (Hiršs, 2016).

In 2021, the Latvian parliament banned the St George ribbon from public events together with other totalitarian symbols such as the Nazi swastika, hammer and sickle and the five-pointed Soviet star (Eng.lsm.lv, 2020). Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Latvian parliament also established 9 May as a day of remembrance for the victims of the war in Ukraine (Kuczyńska-Zonik, 2023, p. 28). The ribbon has also been banned in Ukraine, Germany, Moldova, Georgia, Lithuania and Estonia. In 2022, President Vladimir Putin signed a law that equates the ribbon with state-protected symbols of military glory. The public desecration of the St George ribbon may lead to fines of up to 3 million Rubles (about \$ 41 000) or a prison sentence of up to three years. The ribbon is also used in connection with the letter Z, one of several symbols painted on Russian military vehicles. The letter has become a militarist symbol and is used to indicate support for the invasion of Ukraine.

The Remembrance Day of the Latvian Legionnaires, or 16 March, is another controversial topic. The day has been controversial because the Legion was a unit of Nazi Germany. Except for a brief period from 1998 to 2000, it

is not an official day of remembrance in Latvia but a self-initiative of veterans and their supporters. Veterans chose 16 March as it was the only time both divisions of the Latvian Legion fought together against the Soviet Red Army. Every year, Russian state-controlled television produces stories about the event and uses it to illustrate how Nazism is being revived and glorified in Latvia (Kudors, 2023).

Russia's war in Ukraine has caused one of the most notable geopolitical and societal shocks in Latvia's recent history. Russia's war of aggression has revitalised Latvian society's historical memories of the violence experienced during the Soviet occupation and has exacerbated the role of history in the country's current domestic affairs (Bērziņa et al., 2023). Parallels have been drawn between events in Ukraine and the 1940 occupation of the Baltic states (Ekmanis, 2020; Kasekamp, 2018; Kudors, 2023). In 2014, the Baltic leaders reacted quickly and assertively to the potential threats posed by Russia's actions in Ukraine, and all three states adopted activist approaches. Latvia has been one of Ukraine's most active supporters, and the Baltic leaders have used their EU and NATO membership to push for tough sanctions on Russia (Auers, 2015).

The loss of hegemony in the Baltic region, long dominated by Russia (and the Soviet Union), has elicited strong reactions from political figures in Russia. Economic, political and military tensions have been the norm rather than the exception. Russia's three post-communist presidents have never set foot on independent Baltic soil. Although invitations have been made, there has been little interest on the Russian side in a presidential visit to a Baltic state, as this would add legitimacy to the Baltic states' existence (Auers, 2015).

2.3 Latvia's separate media ecologies

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Latvia also inherited a bilingual media ecology. In the late 1990s, when state-controlled mass media shifted to more commercially based media, the Russian-language market was strengthened and more developed (Brikše et al., 2002), which, together with the Soviet heritage, contributed to linguistically divided audiences in Latvia. Regular audience statistics and other survey data show that both the Latvian-speaking majority and the Russian-speaking minority prefer media in their first language, a pattern inherited from the Soviet period when Latvia's Russian speakers had little interest in domestic Latvian-language media (Kaprans & Juzefovičs, 2020).

The Latvian media environment has been characterised by the influence of multinational corporations and a high level of media commercialisation and tabloidisation (Rožukalne, 2013). Until the 2008 economic recession, Scandinavian media companies dominated the Latvian media market, introducing their journalistic values to the country. In the ensuing economic turbulence,

they abandoned the Baltics and were replaced by media owners who introduced practices similar to those in Russia. International media owners' abandonment of Latvia, however, did not increase the number of domestic owners (Rožukalne, 2012).

In 2009, Latvia's media market lost nearly half of its advertising revenue (Rožukalne, 2012), and the number of nationally owned media decreased while horizontal concentration grew (Jastramskis et al., 2017). The commercialisation of the Latvian media environment and the development of an instrumental journalistic culture also increased when the oligarchs lost power during the economic crisis. Media organisations that were dependent on these oligarchs could no longer rely on continued financial support for the media operations. Instead, they had to both promote the oligarchs' interests and simultaneously make enough money to stay in business (Rožukalne, 2020).

2.3.1 Local media in two languages

The bilingual Latvian media ecology has also resulted in a number of media outlets that publish in both Latvian and Russian, with editorial staff tailoring their content to Latvian-speaking and Russian-speaking audiences. This tradition began during the Khrushchev era with the influential *Rīgas Balss* (1957–2009). During the transition period from Soviet rule to independence, many new newspapers also had parallel Latvian and Russian editions, including the Western-style newspaper *Diena* (1990–).

Latvian news portals are very popular among Russian-speaking youth in Latvia. Delfi (Delfi.lv) is Latvia's largest news portal and ranks as one of the most popular websites in Latvia. The second most popular news portal is TVNET.lv, followed by the news portal Mixnews (mixnews.lv). All three news portals publish in both Latvian and Russian. Compared to online media, television, radio and print media are not as popular among Russian-speaking youth and have been losing ground in recent years, regardless of language. The major Latvian language newspapers are *Latvijas Avīze* (La.lv), *Diena* (Diena.lv) and *Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze* NRA (Nra.lv). Public Broadcasting of Latvia LSM (Lsm.lv) is a radio and television organisation directly financed by the Latvian state. It is operated by Latvia's public broadcasters Latvian Television and Radio Latvia. Its website was launched in 2013, and its content is currently available in Latvian, Russian and English. Following the war, this will, however, change in the future, as will be shown in the next section.

2.3.2 Protecting Latvia's information sphere

For many years, the Latvian authorities have strived to create a single information space promoting cohesiveness based on the official language. They have also worked to strengthen Latvia's belonging to the European cultural space while at the same time protecting their national security and decreasing

Russia's influence in Latvia. The Latvian National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP) has made several decisions over the years to restrict Russian television broadcasting in Latvia in relation to incitement to hatred and violence as well as administrative issues. As such, the Latvian media market has been impacted by political factors, such as EU sanctions against Russian citizens who own media outlets, which has directly affected the Baltic media markets (Denisa-Liepniece, 2022).

In 2020, the Baltic Media Alliance (BMA), which had 25 television channels in the Baltics and produced local television news in Latvia and Estonia, closed down. The *Perviy Baltiiskiy Kanal* (PBK) was for a long time the most popular TV channel among Russian speakers in Latvia. In 2020, the NEPLP also banned seven television channels operated by the Russian state-owned network RT, arguing that they were under the effective control of Dmitry Kiselyov, who heads another Russian state media group against which the EU has instated sanctions.

Reporters Without Borders have criticised Latvia's media restrictions. In December 2020, the Latvian authorities charged several journalists with violating EU sanctions because they worked for Kiselyov's media group units in Latvia. However, Reporters Without Borders stated that most of the people placed under surveillance in the investigation of the BMA were wrongly identified as journalists, providing fuel for the Kremlin campaign to portray Latvian press freedom as fiction (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.).

In 2022, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, all Russian media were immediately banned in Latvia on the grounds that the channels posed a threat to national security. NEPLP also blocked access to 71 websites that distributed pro-Kremlin propaganda and supported and glorified Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As stated in the Introduction, both RT and Sputnik were blocked in the EU.

2.3.3 Welcoming independent Russian media

While blocking Russian media from the Latvian information space, Latvia has also welcomed independent Russian media outlets. The Russian independent media outlet *Meduza* (medua.io) has operated in Latvia since 2014 and is popular among young Russian speakers in Latvia. Since February 2022, Latvia has welcomed more than 200 Russian journalists and 23 media organisations. These media organisations serve as a substitute for the banned channels but have also been subject to debate, as people say that welcoming these journalists to Latvia comes with national security risks. One controversial example was the case of the independent Russian TV channel Dohzd (TV Rain), which was granted a broadcasting licence by NEPLP but had it removed just a few months later due to not following Latvian law. The TV channel was fined for airing a map labelling Crimea as Russian territory and calling Russian forces 'our army'. The licence was removed as NEPLP was convinced that the

management of Dohzd did not understand the nature and gravity of the infringements (Eng.lsm.lv, 2022b).

The question of substituting the banned Russian media outlets is currently being debated. Historically, media policymakers in Latvia have been enthusiastic about restricting the presence of Russian media in Latvia, and efforts to provide alternative content to what has been offered by Russian television have been limited. For a long time, there was no proactive or consistent long-term media policy for developing Russian-language public broadcasting (Kaprāns & Juzefovičs, 2020). This attitude changed in 2021 when Latvia's political elite granted Latvian public radio and television organisations extra funding to provide Russian-language news and current affairs content (Eng.lsm.lv, 2021). They did, however, reject the idea of launching a fully-fledged Russian-language public TV channel. This decision stands in contrast to Estonia, where the Russian-language public service TV channel ETV+ was launched in 2015.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, circumstances changed once again. On 28 September 2023, the Latvian parliament approved the National Security Concept, which states that "all content created by public media must only be in Latvian and languages belonging to the European cultural space from 1 January 2026" (Eng.lsm.lv, 2023b). The move would essentially prohibit Latvian TV and Latvian Radio from continuing to produce content in Russian. Ivars Āboliņš, chairman of NEPLP, defended the decision and stated in an interview that Russian-language media were still dominant, even after 121 Russian media channels were banned: "A year ago, this Russian domination was even greater." He also stated that the proportion of Russian in Latvia's media space is huge: "In Latvia there are 252 retransmitted media, of which 127 are also available in Russian, and 42 in Latvian. (...) We see no reason to continue the absolute dominance of Russian" (Eng.lsm.lv, 2023a).

Media organisations are concerned that Russian speakers in Latvia will no longer have regular access to credible and fact-checked information, leaving them exposed to disinformation, fake news and propaganda. They believe that if adopted, the proposal will undermine citizens' fundamental human rights – as enshrined in international, EU and European human rights law – to "access the media and impart and receive information including in their own language". The organisations call on the Latvian government to reconsider its proposal and launch an open debate to safeguard media freedom (Reporters Without Borders, 2023).

While Russian media has been banned in Latvia, many Russian speakers in Latvia continue to watch Russian state-controlled television either via the internet using VPN or by using illegal TV programming. In 2022, the NEPLP ordered research that showed that 60 per cent of Latvian residents (95% among Russian speakers) would like to continue watching Russian channels. Following the ban, the shadow audience of Russian channels has also increased (Struberga, 2023, p. 69).

2.3.4 Russian YouTubers

While Russian television channels and websites have been banned in Latvia, many young Russian speakers follow Russian YouTubers. As a result of the crackdown on media in Russia, many independent media and journalists have found a second home on YouTube. This development reveals a merger between tech and media giants and blurs the boundaries between individual and corporate agency (Bodrunova, 2021; Strukov, 2021, p. 164). While many Russians in Russia are losing faith in state-controlled television and turn to YouTube for their primary source of entertainment, YouTube is becoming increasingly restricted in Russia, and its creators have few ways of monetising content. In Latvia, the most commonly followed Russian YouTubers relevant to this study are Yuriy Dud, Ilya Varlamov, Ruslan Usachev and Maxim Katz.

Yuriy Dud is a German-born former sports journalist and one of Russia's best-known journalists and video bloggers. He is famous for making long-form interviews with well-known politicians and public figures. His YouTube channel was launched in 2017 and is the largest independent Russian-language journalistic channel with 10.3 million subscribers and over 2 billion views. Dud landed on the Russian government's foreign agents registry for speaking out against the war in April 2022, and shortly after, he left Russia. On 11 November 2023, the Russian state-controlled news agency TASS said that the Moscow Prosecutor's Office had begun investigating Dud for possible 'discreditation' of the Russian Armed Forces.

Ilya Varlamov is a freelance journalist and popular travel video blogger from Moscow. Having a background in architecture, he is famous for his materials about the urban environment in Russian cities. His channel has 4.83 million subscribers and over 1 billion views. He was declared a foreign agent in May 2023. According to the Russian Ministry of Justice's website, Varlamov disseminated inaccurate information about decisions and policies adopted by the public authorities.

Ruslan Usachev is a popular Russian YouTuber from Saint Petersburg who launched his YouTube channel in 2010. He regularly publishes travel blogs and comedy videos. The channel has 2.78 million subscribers. His most popular video is a 47-minute-long adventure featuring him and his friends going on a \$40 000 cruise to the North Pole. The video has been viewed more than 8.5 million times.

Maxim Katz is a Russian political opposition activist and YouTuber from Moscow. His political career started in 2012 when he was elected as a municipal deputy in Moscow. Katz is known for his work as an opposition election campaign strategist, having served as campaign chief or deputy for the electoral runs of, among others, Alexei Navalny. His YouTube channel was launched in 2010 and has 2.03 million subscribers and over 1 billion views. Katz has been put on the foreign agent list and was on 24 August 2023 given

an 8-year sentence in absentia, charged for discrediting the Russian Armed Forces.

Russian YouTubers are of interest to this study because of their popularity among youth and for their social and political content. They often share information from Russian state-controlled media by critiquing, interpreting or amplifying the narratives. It is common for these YouTubers to use humour or satire to share and critique state content. Doing so might dilute critical perspectives and subtly legitimise state narratives.

2.4 Russia's influence in Latvia

2.4.1 Russia's compatriot policy

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia took upon itself the right and duty to protect Russian speakers outside of the Russian Federation, regardless of their citizenship status or nationality. However, it was not until 2004 that an Agency for Compatriots Living Abroad was established as a division of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 2006, the Coordination Councils of Russian diasporas were set up abroad to work closely with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The state organisation Roszarubezhtsentr (Centre for Russians Abroad) served to support Russian speakers residing abroad. Roszarubezhtsentr was in 2008 turned into the current agency Rosotrudnichestvo (Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation), one of the key actors in implementing Russia's compatriot policy.

In 2008, the compatriot policy was mentioned for the first time in the Russian Foreign Policy Concept, where the government commits to protecting compatriots abroad and identifies "discrimination and the suppression of the rights, freedoms and legitimate interests of the citizens of the Russian Federation in foreign states" as the main threats to not only Russian compatriots but also Russian security interests (Kremlin, 2008). The policy was further mentioned in 2013 and 2016. In 2012 the Foundation for Supporting and Defending the Rights of Compatriots Living Abroad was created (Persson, 2014), whose purpose is to provide Russian compatriots with comprehensive legal and other necessary support in cases of violation of their rights, freedoms and legitimate interests in accordance with generally recognised principles and norms of international human rights law.

The official goal of the compatriot policy is to help Russians living abroad maintain ties with their historical homeland. According to Kudors (2014), the policy has two goals: to acquire loyalty to Russia among compatriots living abroad with the help of soft power and to use these consolidated diaspora groups to achieve Russia's foreign policy goals. The promotion of the Russian language has an important position along with the interpretation of history and

the defence of compatriots' rights. Therefore, the semi-governmental organisation Russkiy Mir Foundation (Russian World) was created in 2007 as a joint project of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Science. The organisation promotes the Russian language and culture abroad and thus "reconnects the Russian community abroad with their homeland, forging new and stronger links through cultural and social programmes, exchanges and assistance in relocation", as the Foundation's mission statement reads on its website (Pieper, 2020).

The Russian government defines the term compatriots broadly to incorporate not only ethnic Russians and Russian speakers but also their families and others who may have cultural or other connections to the Russian Federation. Critics argue that the concept of Russia's compatriots abroad is somewhat ambiguous and widely interpretable, which allows Russia to use the idea of protecting compatriots' rights as a moral justification for interfering in the internal matters of sovereign states, using military force and violating the territorial integrity of its neighbouring states. This is a development we have seen in Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, where Russia's intervention in Crimea in 2014 was directly justified as a measure to protect the rights of Russian speakers. It is also crucial to remember that the compatriot policy is a discursive practice aimed at creating and maintaining group boundaries rather than a necessary reflection of actual group boundaries (Bērziņa, 2018; Cheskin & Kachuyevski, 2019; Pieper, 2020; Pupcenoks & Seltzer, 2021).

The Latgale region has become one of the most recognised borderland regions in which Russia has had influence in Latvia. In 2015, pro-Russian activists proposed the concept of the 'Latgale People's Republic'. In 2016, the BBC broadcasted the mockumentary *World War Three: Inside the War Room*, which featured a scenario where Russia incites rebellion in Latgale, escalating into a full-scale conflict between Russia and NATO (Andžāns, 2024, p. 54).

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has committed to even more significant investments in protecting its compatriots (Belo, 2024). Former president Dmitry Medvedev's recent appeals to Russians abroad to mobilise in order to inflict 'maximum harm' on the West reinforces fears that Latvia's Russian-speaking population increasingly is a security risk (Mieriņa, 2024).

2.4.2 Sputnik Latvia

The media plays an important role in Russia's information influence activities in the Baltic states (Chakars & Ekmanis, 2022; Sazonov et al., 2021). Sputnik and RT (formerly Russia Today) are two media outlets controlled by the Russian state that were developed primarily to promote Russia's worldviews to global audiences. RT was created in 2005 to provide international audiences with a Russian perspective on events and issues. Sputnik was launched in 2014 and is part of Rossiya Segodnya, constructed through the 2013 merger of the

international radio channel Voice of Russia and the nationally focused news agency RIA Novosti by a presidential decree. Sputnik is tasked with generating “coverage abroad of the state policy of the Russian Federation and public life in the Russian Federation” (President of Russia, 2013).

Both RT and Sputnik are owned by Rossiya Segodnya, which translates to ‘Russia Today’ but is unrelated to the original RT branding. Since 2013, RIA Novosti (a Russian language news website) has been a subsidiary media brand alongside Sputnik and other outlets such as InoSMI (a website that produces Russian language translations and summaries of Western media output). Senior figures at Rossiya Segodnya and RT have multiple roles within the Russian media sphere. Dmitry Kiselyov, Head of Rossiya Segodnya, is also Deputy Director of the All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VTGRK) and hosts the popular news programme *Vesti Nedeli* (News of the Week) on Rossiya-1. Margarita Simonyan is the Editor-in-Chief of both RT and Rossiya Segodnya (Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2018).

Sputnik was, up until it was banned in Europe in 2022, operating in 31 languages, and RT had one of the highest viewership rates for a television channel, with almost 3 billion views (compared with 1.8 billion views for Al Jazeera English) (Elsawah & Howard, 2020). For a long time, both channels have been accused of blurring the lines between public diplomacy, propaganda and traditional journalism (Rawnsley, 2015; Wright et al., 2020). Sputnik and RT were banned in Latvia before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine but continued to operate by moving their websites to a .ru domain. In March 2022, however, the NEPLP blocked all online resources related to Sputnik and RT. Russia has called the ban groundless, stating that Latvia has started an information war by censoring.

In March 2024, Marat Kasem, a former Sputnik employee born and raised in Latvia, said in an interview that what he did was classical propaganda and not related to journalism. Kasem was the editor of Sputnik Lithuania and hosted a weekly radio show with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ spokesperson Maria Zakharova. According to Kasem, the main guidelines came directly from the Russian president’s administration (Eng.lsm.lv, 2024a).

2.4.3 Following 24 February 2022

Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the relationship between Latvia and Russia has further deteriorated. As mentioned, the Baltic states (along with Poland) are the most vocal advocates of the EU sanctions against Russia. Latvia has taken several straightforward and decisive steps to decrease Russia’s influence and presence in Latvia, from implementing sanctions and a non-entry policy for Russian citizens to examining the Latvian language proficiency of residents with Russian citizenship and removing several artefacts symbolising imperialism from public spaces (Struberga, 2023). In 2022, the

Latvian government closed the two Russian consulates, and in 2023, the Russian ambassador to Latvia was expelled. There is a clear consensus among the Baltic elites that Ukraine's eventual collapse in Russia's war would mean that the Baltic states would become the next victims of Russia's aggression (Kascian et al., 2024).

While Russian speakers in Latvia tend to be less inclined to blame Russia for the war in Ukraine, many do support Ukraine's fight for independence and freedom. The October 2022 parliamentary elections in Latvia brought a complete defeat to Latvia's largest Russian speakers' party, Harmony. While some might have been dissatisfied with the party's strong stand against the war and turned to the new populist party 'For Stability!', many young Russian speakers seem to have voted for the Progressives. This left-wing green party has been active in its support of Ukraine (Bergmane, 2023).

Given recent changes in Latvian society, there is a risk that members of Latvia's Russian-speaking community will feel more alienated and isolated and that feelings of being discriminated against will increase (Ekman, 2024; Krumm et al., 2023; Rönngren, 2022; Vohra, 2023). Many measures, such as banning Russian media and removing monuments, were implemented in the name of security, often without public consideration. Criticism of these measures on the part of the Russian-speaking minority was often interpreted as a sign of disloyalty and pandering to the Kremlin and used to alienate them further. Mieriņa (2024) finds that rather than promoting integration, de-Russification has made members of the Russian community feel more isolated and cynical about Latvian politics. At the same time, there are signs that the Russian (and Russophone) community is becoming more heterogeneous, with some groups choosing to disassociate themselves from Russians.

Concluding remarks

To conclude, it is essential to note that much of Russia's influence in Latvia is inherent and the result of tsarist and Soviet legacies as much as current policies. Russia's influence is amplified by the fact that the Russian diaspora and Russian and Soviet culture have been part of the social matrix for over half a century. Despite more than 30 years of independence and over 20 years as an EU member, persistent divisions exist between the majority group of Latvians and the substantial Russian-speaking population. Minority rights reforms, legal guarantees and bilingualism have not resolved political and social divisions in Latvia, and many Russian speakers are alienated from the Latvian state (Bērziņa & Zupa, 2021). One possible explanation is that government integration policy is only one factor to consider when assessing societal integration, which is also shaped by the inherited historical legacy of intergroup relations and regional developments such as European integration and the relationship with Russia (Muižnieks, 2010). Russia's war in Ukraine has securitised already divisive issues, including historical memory, language preference and access to media in one's preferred language (Kachuyevski, 2017). The Russian language is squeezed out from the public sphere, the publicly funded Russian-language school system will be no more, and Soviet-era monuments have been demolished.

3 Theoretical framework

This chapter presents the thesis' main theoretical framework, which combines narrative theory, theories of media use, reception and affect. Important concepts are defined and it is described how they are used to study processes of making sense of strategic narratives. Sensemaking is used here as an umbrella term for how people approach a text and create meaning or become attached to it.

First, the section called narrative persuasion provides an overview of narrative studies. Here, the study's understanding of narratives and how they can be used for persuasion as a process of strategising is described in its overall framework, which focuses on strategic narratives and their components, levels and processes. Based on the framework, Russian strategic narratives on Latvia embedded in Russian foreign policy statements and state-controlled media are identified and analysed.

Second, the theory of cross-media use is presented and, more specifically, the concept of news media repertoires, which is used to map young Russian speakers' news media use in Latvia and their overall perception of news media. Doing so, it provides an overview of participants' media ecology as a crucial component of the communication process and the projection of strategic narratives, which never occurs in a vacuum. It also offers a context-sensitive approach to the reception of narratives, given that young Russian speakers in Latvia navigate several media ecologies.

Third, the section called reception of strategic narratives introduces reception theory. A reception model consisting of different reception modes is used to describe how young Russian speakers in Latvia move between different modes of reception when confronted with Russian strategic narratives. Affect theory is also introduced to describe how affect and emotion matter when people react to and make sense of different strategic narratives.

The chapter ends with a synthesis, providing a summary of how the mentioned theories fit together in the framework for the purpose of the study. The theories are described in terms of their methodological use in the analysis, and their limitations are addressed.

3.1 Narrative persuasion

Persuasion has been studied in many disciplines and could be said to serve as an umbrella term for influence. With the rise of mass communication, research on persuasion and how organised communication is used in pursuit of influence has proliferated since the early twentieth century (Bakir et al., 2019, p. 312). Media and communication studies were born at the time of the heightened interest in propaganda after World War I, when communication became a key social problem (Bernays, 2004; Lasswell, 1927; Lippmann, 1965). In the most neutral sense, propaganda means disseminating or promoting particular ideas (Snow et al., 2024; Taylor, 2003) to sway public opinion (Lippmann, 1965; Sproule, 1997), but it became a concept with profoundly negative connotations in the West. To identify a message as propaganda was to suggest something negative and dishonest (Snow et al., 2024). Public diplomacy was introduced as a democratic alternative to propaganda, which could be described as an attempt to manage the international environment through engagement with a foreign public (Cull, 2019, p. 12).

For the purpose of this thesis, the concept of strategic narratives is used, which has gained popularity in the past ten years and was developed within international relations as a way to study how actors use narratives as an instrument to influence international politics. This study builds on this conceptual framework as it is a more specific and neutral concept to study the perception and reception of narratives.

This thesis builds on the assumption that human beings are storytellers. We understand and make sense of the world by telling stories, and we use narratives to structure information and construct our identities (Fisher, 1985; White, 1973). We process new information by comparing it to past experiences and use it to anticipate how events will play out in the future (Czarniawska, 2004). This makes narratives a highly persuasive form of communication. Inspired by Bilandzic and Busselle (2013), this section discusses ‘narrative persuasion’, which is used in this thesis as an umbrella term for how narratives can be used for persuasive purposes. Bilandzic and Busselle (2013, p. 200) describe how narrative in the context of persuasion commonly is considered in opposition to argumentation, a separation that likely began with Aristotle’s distinction between *logos* and *pathos*. This separation fails to recognise narrative elements in arguments and rhetorical elements in narratives. The following section defines narrative and persuasion, beginning with an overview of narrative theory.

A narrative can be defined as a sequence of events, experiences or actions with a plot that ties together different parts into a meaningful whole. It has a beginning, a middle and an end (Aristotle, 1997). Most classical narratologists agree that sequence is necessary, where temporality and emplotment set narratives apart from non-narrative communication. Narratologists have typically focused on the content and structures of narrative texts (Barthes & Duisit,

1975; Greimas, 1983; Propp, 1968; Todorov, 1990). While classical narratologists have focused on texts, Labov and Waletzky (1967) further studied stories told in interviews to describe narratives of personal experience. Following the critique of being too focused on canonical stories and neglecting the context, other approaches developed a focus on narrative as interaction via, for example, conversation analysis (Ochs & Capps, 1996; Sacks et al., 1974) and sociolinguistics (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008).

In media and communication studies, researchers have approached the subject of narratives from different angles. Narrative in organisational communication research, for example, is often referred to as corporate storytelling, where prominent work has been conducted by Boje (1991, 1995, 2008), Czarniawska (1997, 1998, 2004) and Gabriel (1995, 2000), studying storytelling as a way to understand how people make sense of organisational change. In media research, Lundby (2008, 2014) has focused on narrative in the mediatization of digital storytelling. Ryan has propagated a media-conscious narratology, where she replaces narrative with the concept of a storyworld and, by doing so, places narrative at the centre of media convergence (Ryan, 2004, 2022; Ryan et al., 2014). Dahlberg and Snickars (2008) have also studied media convergence, examining the relationship between storytelling and media and how the medium changes our way of telling stories when media converge. Silverstone (1981, 1983) has conducted prominent work in his structural analysis of television programmes as mythic narratives, and Fornäs (2021) has studied symbols as cultural narratives.

How is narrative understood in this study? Inspired by Lundby (2009) and as outlined at the beginning of this section, a narrative here is perceived as more than a sequence of events. It is understood as a mode of thought and a vehicle for meaning making. This study adopts a contextual approach, viewing narrative as a communicative act in which narratives are seen as tools or instruments an actor can use for persuasion (Rodden, 2008).

3.1.1 The spectrum of persuasion

In the strategic narrative framework, persuasion can be perceived and studied in different ways. Here, Miskimmon et al. (2013) introduce a spectrum of persuasion, describing how narratives can be understood both as structuring the thoughts and actions of actors and as tools of agency that actors use to persuade each other. This spectrum ranges from thin to thick analyses depending on what strategic narrative process researchers wish to study (Miskimmon et al., 2013).

At the very thin, rationalist end of the spectrum, researchers take certain logics of behaviour as given. Persuasion is often secondary to material inducement through coercion or bargaining. Communication is then seen as an instrument used by actors to manipulate the perceptions and preferences of

others. The media ecology is understood as an arena within which actors transmit information. These studies often seek correlations between different variables.

Thin studies focus on communicative action. The media ecology is seen as a public sphere, and the media is not a neutral space. Persuasion is seen as strategic action and communicative action, where the former is closer to manipulative ways of getting what you want while the latter perceives actors as rational equals that aim towards mutual understanding and consensus.

Thick studies perceive communication as complex and reflexive. Persuasion is seen as a complex process embedded in reflexive action between actors. Communication processes involve more than the exchange of rational claims. Actors exploit the media ecology by using gestures and symbolic acts to contest each other's status, reputation, identity and image.

At the very thick, post-structural end of the spectrum, the actor articulates a discourse that features subject positions that others fill. Persuasion is seen as embedded in discourse. Media ecologies are one more system of discourse with enduring rules and roles that result in stable forms of news and political information through which the meanings of international relations are reproduced. Discourses emerge over a long time and are hard to shift.

Miskimmon et al. (2013) argue that rationalism re-emerges once you get to the thick end of the spectrum. Actors' identities may have been generated through structures that change only very slowly, but those structural conditions can themselves be the subject of narrative contestation and struggle over the discourses that underpin those narratives.

This study places itself on the thicker side of the spectrum of persuasion. Communication is understood to be reflexive, and communication and action trigger responses in others. A thick study perceives communication as a ritual process and not simply as a linear transmission of messages or as a question of whose frame dominates in quantitative terms (O'Loughlin et al., 2017, p. 34). While a thin perspective focuses more on the content and on how to create a compelling narrative, a thick perspective focuses more on the context and on the self. Thus, the focus is not only on the message but also on how it affects the audience, focusing on how meaning is created. The media ecology is seen as a dynamic space that is not just an arena within which actors exchange information and claims but it is also unpredictable and multifaceted. Symbolism, emotion and affect are central to persuasion at the thicker part of the spectrum (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 105).

3.1.2 Strategising narratives

Since narratives can be understood as vehicles for meaning making, they can be used as instruments to persuade audiences and influence public opinion. One way of doing so is to construct strategic narratives. Strategic narratives are "a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past,

present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors” (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 3). Important to note is that these narratives are seen as tools to manage expectations and change the discursive environment in which they operate. As mentioned previously, narratives can be understood both as structuring and as tools, which are closely connected in this study.

Strategic narrative as a concept was initially introduced in 2006 by war studies professor Freedman (2006), who saw strategic narratives as an instrument for challenging the legitimacy of enemy forces. He studied how narratives could be deployed strategically to counter opponents in military conflicts. For him, strategic narratives are convincing stories that describe events in a way that allows for drawing definite conclusions.

What makes a narrative strategic? According to Freedman (2006), a strategic narrative is strategic in that it does not arise spontaneously but is deliberately constructed or reinforced out of the ideas and thoughts that are already current. As such, a strategic narrative functions as a purposeful strategy in narrative form (Coticchia & Catanzaro, 2022). Narratives are strategic when they are actively and purposefully used to fulfil a goal or objective. Therefore, the aim is not simply to analyse narratives that actors use in international relations; to make claims about the role of strategic narratives in international relations, we must ask what actors are trying to do with narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2013).

Miskimmon, et al.’s (2013) understanding of strategic narratives is inspired by literary theorist Burke’s (1945, 1966, 1969) thoughts of human beings as symbol-using animals, separated from other animals by their ability to use language to create human reality symbolically (Burke, 1966, p. 6). While acknowledging the importance of time sequence to the definition of narrative, they build on Burke’s work because of his focus on agency and narrative and how actors use narrative. Burke’s ideas fit well with the framework because they did not just want to study narratives and their content but rather how they are used and circulated (A. Miskimmon, personal communication, 20 November 2024). Inspired by Burke’s dramatic pentad, we can identify actors and actions while recognising the importance of temporality by focusing on this narrative structure. Furthermore, Miskimmon et al. understand the relationship between the component parts of a narrative in a dynamic way rather than just categorising them. Thus, the focus is on how these components develop, interconnect and speak with each other. The narrative components may also misalign and clash, creating tensions and driving the narrative forward (Miskimmon et al., 2017a, pp. 6–7).

Inspired by Burke, Miskimmon et al. describe narratives as having five components: actor, setting, tools, conflict and resolution. Actors have agency and are depicted as important to the narrative. Setting refers to how the world is depicted and how it works. What constitutes the stage? Where is the action taking place? Conflict highlights the importance of temporality. Who does

what to whom or to what? Regarding resolution, narratives appeal to human beings due to the presentation of action to resolve a conflict or disrupt the status quo (Roselle et al., 2014).

The tools component was first introduced in later texts. The tools or instruments used are present in the actors' interactions and may consist of policies, negotiations, technologies and other instruments to influence others (Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2019, p. 274). By adding a tool component to narratives, researchers may understand how actions are carried out within a narrative. Burke's pentad includes agency, which corresponds to tools used in the narrative. Since narratives are dynamic rather than static, tools are critical for shaping and advancing the story. By highlighting how actors perform their roles and identifying potential mismatches between narrative elements, the persuasiveness of a narrative can be enhanced.

When analysing and deconstructing strategic narratives, researchers must distinguish between three levels of analysis: system, identity and issue narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2013). A system narrative concerns the international system and articulates a political actor's understanding of how the world is structured, who the players are and how the system works. This narrative could refer to Russia's ideas of a multipolar world with several power centres and justified spheres of interest. An identity narrative conveys the historical experience and sense of self of a nation, region, organisation or other type of actor, the story of a political actor and what values and goals it has. In a Russian context, an identity narrative could refer to the exceptionality of Russia and the Russian world as a separate civilisation. An issue narrative represents a particular policy area, such as a war or conflict, the economy, energy, or the environment the actor seeks to influence. It sets out why a policy is needed and desirable and how it will be implemented or accomplished.

This study primarily addresses issue narratives identified in foreign policy statements and state-controlled media. These levels and narratives are, however, inextricably linked. Strategic narratives employed at one level may affect narratives at other levels and constrain future policy choices or behaviour (Roselle et al., 2014, p. 76). The chances of persuasion are higher when there is coherence in these three types of narratives. Contradictions between narratives at different levels can undermine the effectiveness of strategic narratives related to policy (Miskimmon et al., 2017, p. 8). By analysing the role of strategic narratives at three different levels, we can trace how political actors strategically shape and are shaped by narratives (Roselle et al., 2014, p. 77).

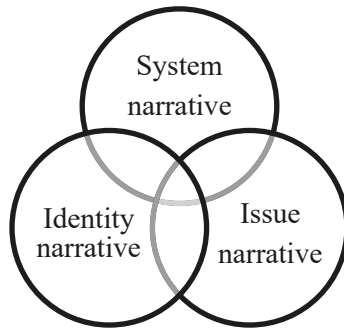


Figure 1. How different types of strategic narratives are linked together

Three processes are associated with the communication of strategic narratives: formation, projection and reception. Formation addresses how narratives are formed and involves understanding actors' strategic goals and types of communication. Strategic narratives may be designed with short-term and long-term goals. Understanding an actor's strategic aims is central to studying strategic narratives. For example, if an actor can focus on what is perceived as hypocrisy or a mismatch with an accepted narrative, a target audience may be discouraged from making particular decisions. Projection addresses how narratives are disseminated and how they can be challenged and contested, particularly in a hybrid media ecology. Rapid technological changes and our shifting media ecology make it difficult for actors to attempt to control their narratives. Reception addresses how narratives are received. Reception occurs in social contexts where narratives may be discussed socially and processed individually. Describing how audiences receive and interpret narratives requires a thorough understanding of the media ecology those audiences inhabit (which is presented and discussed in the next section). This cultural context causes audiences to be pulled to certain narratives and constitutes the political context in which actors push various narratives towards audiences. This study focuses primarily on projection and reception of strategic narratives.

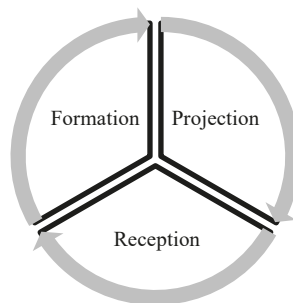


Figure 2. The communication process of strategic narratives

Strategic narratives should be seen as a cyclical progression of three interwoven processes of formation, projection and reception. Miskimmon et al. (2017) clarify that the formation, projection and reception of strategic narratives does not occur in a vacuum and can only be understood by accounting for the media ecologies in which they circulate and have effect.

Narratives also clash when actors contest each other. Here, Miskimmon et al. (2013, p. 110) introduce different aspects of narrative contestation pertaining to informational and emotional content, epistemology, degree of ambiguity and relation to action. They also mention contestation related to the formation, projection and reception of strategic narratives. Strategic narratives therefore need to contain relevant and useful information, and they not only provide information but also engage audiences emotionally. The interpretation of a narrative also depends on the epistemology audiences hold and needs to be ambiguous enough for different audiences to find meaning in the narrative. Lastly, strategic narratives need to appear consistent with events as they are known by the audiences. Failure to do so might lead to charges of hypocrisy against the narrator, reducing the narrator's credibility and trustworthiness. While the study of the formation of narratives is concerned with how transparent and democratic the process appears, projection deals with the actors projecting the narrative and whether they are seen as credible and trustworthy. The reception can be contested as different actors try to control who will receive the narrative, for example by controlling the information infrastructure (Miskimmon et al., 2013, pp. 114–116).

The concept of strategic narratives has gained significant traction in academic research, and some scholars criticise that the concept has been applied in an overly broad or imprecise manner, pointing to discourses as bundles of perceptions of social reality rather than narratives (Bolin & Kunelius, 2023; Colley, 2020; Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019). While the concept of strategic narratives is often used interchangeably with discourse, rhetoric and framing, these concepts, though closely connected and occasionally overlapping, are not synonymous. They overlap, for example, in how frames shape how events are presented rhetorically, but strategic narratives differ from framing and discourse through their temporal dimension and sense of movement.

Within the conceptual framework of Miskimmon et al. (2013, p. 7), discourses are understood as the raw material of communication that actors plot into narratives. They take a Foucauldian conception of discourse as a set of meanings and practices that contain rules about what is say-able and know-able and that create roles that actors fill. As such, it is important to emphasise that actors can only form and project a narrative based on the discourses available to them in their historical situation, meaning that discourses have a structuring effect on narrative action. Actors cannot create a narrative out of nothing: “The parameters of a state’s strategic narratives are bounded by prevailing domestic and international understandings and expectations of that state, readings of its history, and evaluations of its reputation” (Miskimmon et al., 2013,

p. 9). So, part of the task of strategic narratives is to give narrativity to events as they unfold within these constraints. Here, actors reflexively work with discourse to construct narratives with the instrumental aim of influencing the opinions and behaviour of others. History, analogies, metaphors, symbols and images can trigger and/or shape narratives.

According to Entman (2009), framing is defined as the act of “selecting some facets of events or issues and making connections among them to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution” (Entman, 2009, p. 5). As such, framing can be conceived as snapshots of an issue in a given moment. Similar to discourses, frames are thus understood to be bricks for building a specific strategic narrative where various components of a narrative are framed in a certain way (Coticchia & Catanzaro, 2022; Livingston & Nassetta, 2018; Miskimmon et al., 2013). Framing and discourse, however, lack features of causal transformation that take actors from one status quo to another in the same way as narratives do (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 7).

As stated in the introductory chapter, most previous research has so far primarily dealt with the formation and projection of strategic narratives, but there is a growing interest in the reception of strategic narratives, to which this study seeks to contribute theoretically and empirically. A significant number of studies has been conducted using the concept of strategic narratives focusing on, for example, China (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019, 2021), the Dutch mission in Afghanistan (Dimitriu & Graaf, 2016; Dimitriu, 2012), Russia’s war in Ukraine (Claessen, 2021; Fridrichová, 2023; Gackowski & Brylska, 2022; Khaldarova, 2021) and Russia in general (Hansson et al., 2023; Hinck et al., 2018; Ventsel et al., 2021). Strategic narratives have also been conceptualised as a destabilising force introducing the term antagonistic narration (Chaban et al., 2023; Deverell et al., 2020; Hoyle et al., 2023; Hoyle, Powell, et al., 2024; Hoyle, Wagnsson, et al., 2024; Wagnsson & Barzanje, 2021). To date, two dissertations have been written that focus on the formation and projection of Russian strategic narratives (Grigor, 2020; Klyueva, 2017).

Klyueva (2017) identified five major narratives in Russian foreign policy documents: 1) Russian values and priorities in foreign policy and international relations; 2) international cultural-humanitarian cooperation; 3) Russia’s stance on international relations issues; 4) Russian language promotion; and 5) state support of Russian compatriots and diasporas. These narratives were followed in state-controlled media outlets, Sputnik and RT.

Grigor (2020) identified three Russian master narratives that constitute the specific context of contemporary Russian society. They are recognised by the majority of people within a particular culture and have a moral component that informs why certain groups are marginalised within society: 1) Russia versus the West; 2) Russia as a victor over fascism in World War II; and 3) Russia as a leader of Slavic nations. The first narrative has not emerged spontaneously, is not new, and is flexible in that it often combines Russia’s Orthodox Christian values and its communist legacies. This narrative also appeals to a wide

range of people with anti-Western, anti-liberal and anti-globalist views, where Russia is seen as spiritual, moral and loyal to traditional values. In contrast, the West is seen as immoral and acts only to serve its vested interests. The second narrative is based on the victory in World War II, and as a result of 80 years of cultivating the memory and cult of the war, it is seen by many Russians as the most sacred achievement in Russia's history. Therefore, playing up the fascist card has proved to be an excellent instrument to bolster an existential threat that resonates well in the post-Soviet space. Finally, the third narrative is based on the Soviet regime's metaphor of fraternity, where all nations are brothers and Russia is the caring and mindful big brother. This narrative is also part of the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) concept, which re-emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Grigor, 2020).

These findings are important for this study as they show the consistency of Russian strategic narratives identified in this empirical material. As will be shown in the following section, narratives never exist in a vacuum. Paying attention to the media ecology means including an important context in which strategic narratives are circulated and approached by audiences.

3.2 News media repertoires

Miskimmon and O'Loughlin (2019, 2021) emphasise that researchers need to understand why people hold different narratives and why they believe any news or information. News, in turn, influence people's worldviews, making people's news habits central to understanding their beliefs and behaviours (Andersen et al., 2022; Edgerly, 2015). In today's mediatised world, where all elements of our social world are related to digital media and their underlying infrastructures (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hepp, 2020), our sense of reality is increasingly structured by media-based narratives that shape our sense of everyday reality (Bruner, 1991; Gergen & Gergen, 2006). News media are crucial for understanding the processes of strategic narratives and the reception process of such narratives.

For this study, news media use becomes all the more important since Russian-speaking youth in Latvia have access to a wide range of media outlets and are simultaneously taking part in two separate media ecologies. This section focuses on people's cross-media use, defined as the consumption of news across a range of available news media (Schröder & Steeg Larsen, 2010), where the convergence of media (Jenkins, 2006) has increased the number of media technologies and uprooted media content from the devices it previously was uniquely tied to, allowing content to be consumed via a variety of different devices and platforms (Vandenplas & Picone, 2021). For a younger audience, cross-media use increasingly takes place within so-called meta-media such as X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook (Mathieu & Pavličková, 2017, p.

427). These meta-media are primarily organised around a cross-media logic, exposing audiences to a variety of content in one location.

When studying people's cross-media use, this thesis uses the concept of media repertoires, which involves the entirety of media that a person regularly uses (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012; Hasebrink & Popp, 2006). The conceptual framework of media repertoires puts analytical emphasis on patterns of media selection (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006). A news media repertoire, more specifically, is defined as "the cross-media constellation of news and news-like items deployed for sensemaking around public affairs in the broader media ensemble, which changes over time" (Vulpius et al., 2023, pp. 79–80). This term is used to specifically refer to combinations of media outlets utilised to retrieve and access news about current affairs.

Both the projection and the reception of strategic narratives are included in the context of news media repertoires. Inspired by van Dijk (2008, 2009), this study perceives context as socially constructed. It is not just 'out there' or 'given' but based on subjective factors and is, as such, not only a setting for the communication process but also an actual element of communicative action.

The decision to include news media repertoires in this study is besides Miskimmon et al.'s emphasis on media ecology also based on previous research that this study seeks to expand upon. Szostek (2017a, 2017b, 2018) found that there indeed seemed to be a connection between media use and narrative reception. For example, using a survey, she found that a relationship existed between the use of state-aligned news sources and support for Russian authorities' negative narrative about the West. In the interviews, however, it turned out that the students considered Russian state-controlled television as propagandistic and favoured online sources. At the same time, participants spontaneously reproduced the overarching strategic narrative that state-controlled television conveys when explaining Russia's strained relations with the West. Szostek's findings mean that an audience may accept a narrative while rejecting media sources via which the narrative is projected. Researchers do, however, not know why this might be the case, which is one reason this study includes questions on cross-media use to complement the reception analysis.

In a Baltic context, previous research conducted by Vihalemm, Juzefovičs and Kaprāns has found that the depiction of Russian speakers as pro-Russian is only partly justified and that their media consumption patterns are far from uniform (Juzefovičs & Vihalemm, 2020; Vihalemm et al., 2019; Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2020, 2022, 2023). They demonstrate how a media-centric perspective provides only limited explanatory potential in terms of Russia's influence over Russian speakers in Latvia and call for a more context-sensitive approach (Kaprāns & Juzefovičs, 2020; Kaprāns & Mieriņa, 2019b).

Although media use provides a limited explanatory potential, Szostek (2018) argues that variation in media repertoires probably affects the sense-making processes behind narrative reception, even if it does not always affect

the outcomes. By studying people's cross-media use and news media repertoires and their connection to narrative reception, researchers are able to differentiate not only between the range of media people consume and their reception of a narrative depending on the number and types of news sources they regularly consume but also what motivates a person to include or exclude a source associated with a strategic narrative in their repertoire (Szostek, 2018). Media use can also be perceived as an important social and cultural factor, and when it comes to the reception of narratives there is a clustering effect linked to media use and news consumption (Michelle, 2007), which will be described in the section on reception theory.

Many studies using the concept of news media repertoires have been conducted, and although these studies are based on data from different contexts, they show striking similarities. Studies have usually identified a group of so-called 'news omnivores' or 'heavy users' who use a wide range of available news sources. Likewise, they have generally identified a group of 'news avoiders', 'minimalists' or 'occasional users' who have a low overall use of news. Studies on countries with strong public service broadcasters have also identified a repertoire of 'public news consumers' (Bos et al., 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2018), while studies from the United States have identified liberal and conservative news repertoires (Edgerly, 2015; Ksiazek et al., 2019). As such, there seems to be a distinction between 'how often and how many' on the one hand and 'what' on the other. These consistent patterns illustrate how news habits cut across different media systems (Andersen et al., 2022). While news seekers are understood as the part of the population that actively searches for information, the avoiders are those who do not engage with news media (Strömbäck, 2017), either intentionally or unintentionally, due to news overload, low trust in news, or a preference for non-news media content (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020).

The concept of news media repertoires is user-centred and builds on theories of media choice and the uses and gratifications tradition, which is based on an active audience making rational decisions about media consumption in the desire for information, affirmation, entertainment, social interaction or other rewards (Swart et al., 2017). Our choice of media, however, is far from always a rational or conscious decision. It is also shaped by structural factors such as ease of access, awareness of alternatives, the attributes of the medium, and other factors that reflect the current trends of the size and composition of the media supply in the larger media environment (Yuan, 2011). While previous studies show that news habits seem to cut across different media systems, the selection process and awareness of alternatives most likely look different in Sweden, Latvia and Russia. National media restrictions also play a crucial role, and algorithms and automated media affect our agency and play an important role in determining what information is most relevant to us (Bonini & Tréré, 2024).

A particular strength of the concept of repertoires is the encouragement of a process-oriented, holistic and relational view of media use (Vulpius et al., 2023). Hasebrink and Domeyer (2012) emphasise that a media repertoire is not just the basic sum of its components but that there is meaningful coherence to its inner structure. Interestingly, previous research shows that although the audience is seen as an active agent in media selection, an individual may consider a news source too negative, boring or unreliable and still use it nonetheless (Swart et al., 2017; Szostek, 2018). This can partly be explained by the fact that news media repertoires tend to become automated and habituated over time (Peters et al., 2022, p. 3) and seem to be ritualised to a very high extent (Peters & Schröder, 2018). In Latvia, where audiences come across conflicting narratives, there is an important geopolitical dimension where Russian state-controlled media convey negative narratives about Latvia while Latvian media convey negative narratives about Russia, and independent Russian media appear somewhere in between. Inspired by Szostek's findings, it is important to probe to what extent variation in media repertoires corresponds to variation in the acceptance or rejection of a strategic narrative.

The method chapter describes how news media repertoires are approached in this study, and empirical findings are presented in Chapter 6. To address the issue of an overly individualistic perspective and focus on individual use, this study answers Mathieu and Pavlíčková's (2017) call to view media as objects and texts and consider both material and symbolic aspects of media use. Questions on how people perceive news and the media, in general, are included to better understand the repertoires people form as an expression of their mediated lifeworld.

The next section illustrates the approach to the reception process of strategic narratives, emphasising how news media use serves as an important social and cultural factor in the sensemaking process outlined by Michelle's reception model. Emotions and affect theory will also be introduced.

3.3 The reception of narratives

As stated previously, there is a growing interest in studying the reception of strategic narratives and how audiences make sense of narratives. Narrative persuasion has often been connected to cognitive approaches such as media psychology and effect studies. This study embraces a cultural studies perspective, which distinguishes itself from cognitive perspectives by shifting the focus from what texts do to the audience to what texts mean to them (Nightingale, 2013). Reception theory challenges earlier audience research, such as the uses and gratification tradition, for expecting a too rational and active audience (Blumler & Katz, 1974). This study uses Morley's definition of reception as "a semiotic process through which audiences differentially read and make sense of messages which have been transmitted, and act on

those meanings, within the context of the rest of their situation and experience” (Morley, 1980, p. 11). Reception theory emphasises a person’s reception of a media text as a sensemaking process that emerges in the interaction between the media text and the socially situated reader (Hall, 1993; Morley, 1980; Radway, 1991).

Today’s media ecology has triggered conversations around the text-reader metaphor of audience research. Some argue that the concept of audience is outdated (Rosen, 2006). Others argue that people nowadays are audiences all the time, that they are never not audiences (Livingstone, 2013). This thesis uses Schröder’s (2019) definition of audiences as “the people who, in their capacity as social actors, are attending to, negotiating the meaning of, and sometimes participating in the multimodal processes initiated or carried out by institutional media” (Schröder, 2019, p. 160). Audience and reader are used interchangeably in this study. It is strongly asserted that investigating the relationship between media and audiences, or between text and context, remains relevant and insightful. A need for meaning is a need for reception analysis, and the question of meaning is still a central issue in media and communication studies (Mathieu, 2015; Schröder, 2019).

Before describing the use of reception theory in this study, previous studies are presented to motivate this approach. As mentioned at the beginning of the section, a number of studies have been conducted based mainly on cognitive models focusing on narrative effects and the narrative experience itself. This can be ways of engaging with a narrative, such as transportation, identification, presence and flow (Braddock & Dillard, 2016; Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). A reader may perceive a mediated world as more immediate than the actual world and create a feeling of transportation and being present in the storyworld. Flow is when complete focus on an activity is accompanied by a loss of conscious awareness of oneself and one’s surroundings. Green and Brock’s (2000) scale of transportation suggests that transportation into a narrative feels like flow. Identification as a form of engagement is also common (Cohen, 2001; de Graaf et al., 2012). Identification is when a reader strongly identifies with a character and ceases to be aware of their role as a reader. Bilandzic (2006) argues that personal experience with situations and events presented in a story may induce an intense processing mode, which transportation may strengthen.

Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) describe that a component that threatens narrative engagement is distraction in different forms. Relevant to this study is negative judgement, such as a behaviour inconsistent with a character’s motivations or a portrayal inconsistent with real world knowledge or familiar genre conventions. Busselle and Bilandzic refer to perceiving the narrative as coherent and plausible as ‘narrative realism’ and argue that observing inconsistency or unrealism during a narrative experience interferes with engagement in the story. This process is also described as narrative consistency and narrative probability (Fisher, 1985). Typical for these studies is that they provide a

media effects perspective focusing on mental processes. As will be seen below, other scholars have explored these concepts and their connection to strategic narratives with varying results.

Political science scholars have focused on the structure of the narrative itself, suggesting that a narrative needs to be coherent and consistent to resonate. If the narrative is altered and changed too often, it will lose credibility (Ringsmose & Børgesen, 2011). Inspired by Fisher's (1985) idea of narrative probability, Wagnsson and Lundström (2023) tested this claim using a large-scale experimental exploration of narrative reception and refuted the claim. On the contrary, they found that people can be persuaded by a narrative despite regarding a text incoherent. They found no support for the idea that a story needs to be coherent to be persuasive. They also concluded that a narrative could persuade people without personal experience of the topic (Fisher's notion of fidelity) (Hoyle et al., 2021; Hoyle, Powell, et al., 2024; Hoyle, Wagnsson, et al., 2024). Instead, Wagnsson and Lundström (2023) suggest that future research should focus on psychological mechanisms when trying to understand individual processes of narration, as information influence projected through strategic narratives can be influential regardless of the form of the message and also when new ideas are introduced.

Identification has, however, been mentioned by Szostek (2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2018), who found that personal experiences play a crucial role in narrative reception. Similar results have been presented by Archetti (2015), who emphasises the role of personal experience and opinions for narrative reception. If the individual has personal experience, chances increase that the strategic narrative will resonate.

Besides identification and consistency in narratives, studies have also focused on the process of emplotment. Using emplotment, Colley (2017) analysed how participants selectively appropriate some historical events while silencing others to make a point about Britain, its military and how it should be used in the future. He found that for narratives to be persuasive, they must resonate with people's understanding of the world. Similarly, other studies suggest that if a strategic narrative resonates with collective identity and political myths, the audience will be more susceptible (Edenborg, 2022; Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019, 2021; Hudson, 2015; Khaldarova, 2021; Schmitt, 2018).

As far as it is possible to discern, previous studies disagree, however, about which aspects of social reality make a narrative compelling. Previous studies' varying and sometimes conflicting results and findings point to the complexity of narrative persuasiveness. To fill this gap, this study will focus on the complex and sometimes ambivalent process of making sense of strategic narratives as text, using reception and affect theory to explore people's meaning making of narratives.

3.3.1 Modes of reception

This study uses the analytical framework for reception developed by Michelle (2007). Building on previous reception models, such as Hall's (1993) encoding/decoding model and Schröder's multidimensional reception model, Michelle offers a cohesive synthesis and draws from seminal approaches in the field of audience reception and combines them into a clear and workable model. Early reception researchers such as Hall (1993) wanted to show that decoding is a meaning-making practice by suggesting that readers play an active role in decoding messages as they rely on their social contexts.

Early reception scholars sought to find out how audiences handled the hegemonic forces of the media by applying dominant, negotiated or oppositional reading strategies (Schröder, 2019). Michelle criticises the one-dimensional focus on ideology for conflating responses to form and content, which privileges readers' responses to connotative meanings over their engagement with denotative meanings (Michelle, 2007, p. 183). She also suggests that previous reception models do not adequately chart the relationship between how readers assume particular modes of reception and important social and cultural factors such as socio-economic class, gender, ethnicity or political interests. Media use is here considered a social and cultural factor that influences reception.

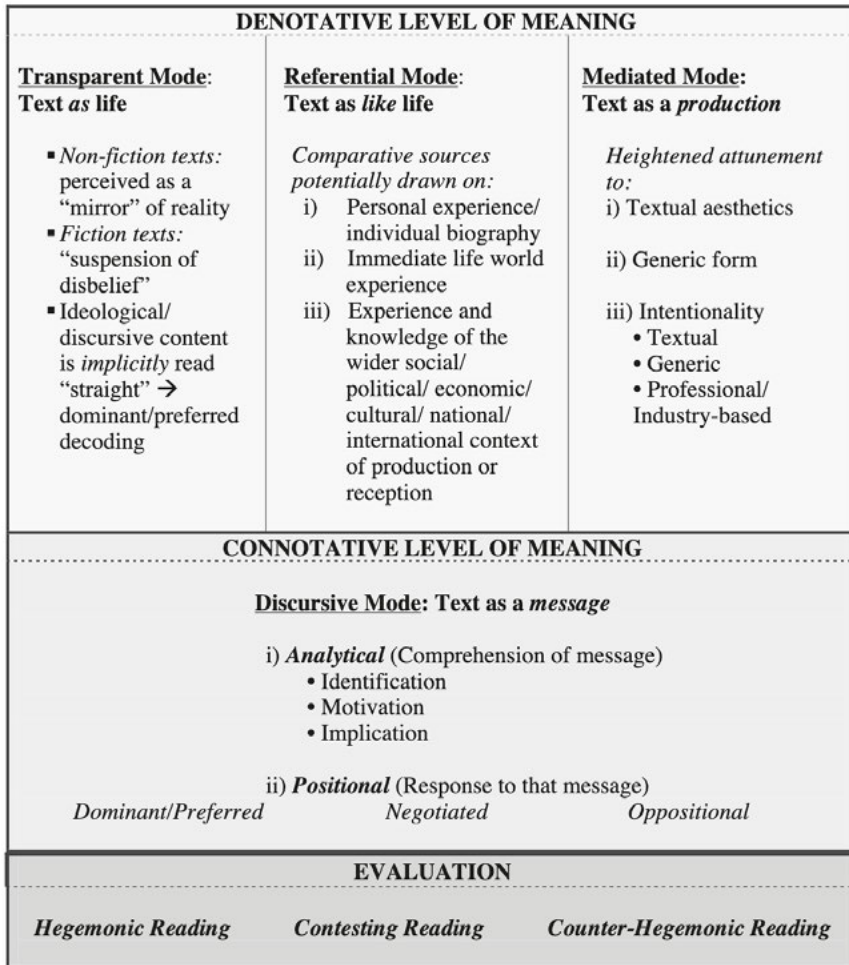
Michelle's reception model is particularly useful for this study as its conceptual language helps advance a deeper and broader understanding of the role of the media within wider discursive struggles and political debates. By separating denotative and connotative levels of reception, researchers can better understand how people position themselves towards a message and how they perceive and make sense of the text in the first place.

The denotative level of reception allows researchers to gain a deeper insight into the role of media use in the reception process and how people assess journalistic features of a text. The model offers an analytical schema that allows the researcher to systematically examine the link between readers' adoption of different modes of reception and their social group memberships. In this study, participants' ethnicity, age and perception of media use are considered. The denotative level also provides a critical reference point for understanding where divergences in interpretation begin. Altogether, the model allows researchers to address questions of both media power and audience resistance.

The reception model has been used in a variety of previous studies, mainly focusing on television and film. Scholars have explored how viewers interpret and respond to various media texts, considering factors such as cultural background, social context and individual experiences (Crosby, 2022; Davis & Vladica, 2010; Holland et al., 2015; Michelle et al., 2012; Smets, 2012, 2014; Tager & Matthee, 2014; Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2022; Zalipour et al., 2014). These studies have provided valuable insights into the ways media audiences

negotiate meaning, highlighting both dominant and oppositional readings in media reception.

Michelle's (2007) model consists of four different modes of reception: text as life (transparent), text as like life (referential) and text as a production (mediated), which belong to denotative levels of meaning, and text as a message (discursive), which belongs to connotative levels of meaning (see Figure 3). Evaluation consists of three types of readings: hegemonic, contesting and counter-hegemonic (Michelle, 2007). Denotative and connotative levels of meaning interact when readers decode the text on both levels simultaneously. Combining both levels contributes to a more nuanced understanding of media texts or, in this case, strategic narratives. The model also highlights how a media text can convey multiple layers of meaning and allow for more diverse audience responses based on individual and collective factors.



Close/ Subjective ←-----→ Distant / Objective
(Relationship between text and viewer)

Figure 3. Michelle’s (2007) model of reception

Denotative levels of meaning

In a transparent reception mode, the reader assesses and comments on persons and events depicted in a text as though encountering them first-hand. Depicted persons and events are assumed to be transparent reflections of an external real world. Such a reading relies on a belief in the accuracy and truthfulness of depictions, which, for the most part, still are presented and accepted by the majority of audience members as relatively undistorted reflections of reality. A transparent mode of reading can be seen as similar to a dominant or preferred position for those solely reading in this mode.

In a referential mode, the reader perceives the media text as standing alongside the real world and compares the depicted reality to their knowledge and experiences. Michelle (2007) argues that a reader can draw from three sources of information when assessing the accuracy of textual depictions of people and events and versions of reality presented in a particular media text: personal experience, immediate lifeworld experience as well as knowledge of the wider context (see Figure 3). This experience may be first-hand or mediated through encounters with other cultural texts, meaning that a reader's understanding of many less immediate aspects of social reality may derive from the media itself. Such assessments are typically made according to a perceived fit or lack of fit with the reader's cultural milieu and existing body of experiences, observations and knowledge.

Based on this information, a reader can confirm, contest or question the accuracy of textual depictions. Even though news media use and news media repertoires are seen as social and cultural factors that permeate the whole reception process, there is a clear connection to a referential mode of reception where the reader can relate to mediated narratives based on their media consumption and perception of news media.

In a mediated mode, the reader recognises the constructed nature of the text as a media production and characteristically draws on knowledge of aspects of media production, aesthetic ideals, generic conventions, and the functions and motivations of the media. At times, this knowledge may interrupt the identification process and/or hinder readers' engagement with the message content of media texts, thereby potentially (but not necessarily) undermining the text's ideological effectiveness. Although a strategic narrative is perceived as a text that a reader decodes and processes, there is a clear connection to the narrative within the text in a mediated mode of reception.

Michelle (2007) suggests three subcategories of a mediated mode of reception: aesthetic focus, generic form and intention focus. First, a mediated mode of reception with an aesthetic focus is one in which the reader draws attention to various technical production features, such as narrative construction, plot, or use of visuals or captions. It often takes the form of a positive or negative evaluation of the quality of such features. Second, a mediated mode of reception with a focus on generic form is one where the reader draws on their knowledge of generic conventions such as narrative formula and characterisation particular to a genre or uses as interpretive frames of reference texts of the same genre, or texts of other genres. Third, a mediated mode of reception can draw on a reader's perception of writers' intentions and motivations in meeting various textual, generic and professional or industry-based imperatives. The reader may, for example, perceive that the writers have constructed certain textual features in particular ways for distinct reasons, such as the need to generate humour, interest or drama within the text itself. Alternatively, a reader may draw on their understanding of certain generic imperatives to make

sense of particular narrative elements, such as the need for texts of that genre to inform, entertain, amuse or educate.

Connotative levels of meaning

The reception model's denotative and connotative levels of meanings interact with each other. While the denotative level focuses on interpreting what is depicted and how, the connotative level or, as Michelle calls it, the discursive mode focuses on the media text's 'message' or its ideological connotations.

In a discursive mode, the reader perceives that the text attempts to communicate a particular message and represents the reader's response. Michelle (2007) suggests two elements: analytical and positional. First, in its analytical dimension, the reader may identify (comprehend) the message explicitly articulated within the text and perhaps analyse it further regarding its motivations or implications. Only once a message is identified may they express their position in response to that message, which will be framed by their discursive affiliations. Here, readers may adopt one of Hall's three possible decoding positions. While some readers in an analytical discursive mode may identify a message or argument within the text, others may consider its nature, logic and coherence or the adequacy of any evidence in support of particular rhetorical claims. Other readers may identify what was not articulated by a text but could, or indeed should, have been said.

Analytical discursive readings may also involve a reader's consideration of the motivation behind the message. This may be framed in terms of the perceived political or discursive aims of the writers in promoting a certain message and their representation of particular characters or events in a text. Media producers may be seen as biased in a particular direction and as attempting to persuade readers to adopt their favoured position. Readers may thus comment negatively or positively on the ideas or feelings the writers hoped to instil in the audience. Some may express a negatively framed conception of the text as having a specific purpose in exerting influence within the social or political sphere or as having a manipulative intent. The reader may suggest that the writers of the text have (perhaps deliberately) distorted reality in some way and are attempting to deceive viewers to secure their own political or ideological intentions. Other audience members may regard the motivations of media producers more positively as progressive and as revealing a previously denied reality or 'truth'. The reader may also comment on the impact of the text on their thoughts or emotions and speculate about the text's possible influence on other, perhaps more susceptible, readers.

Positional discursive readings are where the reader responds to the 'text as a message' and reflects the reader's position concerning textual connotations. Of course, identifying a preferred reading offers no proof of its ideological effectivity, both because the meaning of the text cannot be fixed singularly once and for all and because authorial intention cannot guarantee that this preferred meaning will be the meaning discerned by any individual reader. Thus,

even where a text's structure privileges a particular discursive 'voice', there remains potential for audience members to draw on alternative discourses present both within the text (as subordinated or implicit discursive voices) and within the wider macro context of reception. Like Michelle (2007, p. 209), this study acknowledges that it is possible to identify a message within the text while acknowledging a certain level of polysemic undecidability and polyvocality within media texts.

Evaluation

Finally, Michelle (2007) proposes that once readers' positions in relation to encoded textual meanings have been determined, a final layer of analysis takes place to evaluate whether those receptions constitute hegemonic, contesting or counter-hegemonic readings. It is necessary to differentiate this evaluation from determining readers' positional response since not all media texts are hegemonic in the sense that Hall's original decoding categories assume.

Michelle acknowledges the difficulty of the task, and this study also recognises the complexity of categorising people's readings of narrative texts. Since evaluations are contextual and ambiguous, the task places significant pressure on the analyst to interpret them while being influenced by their political stance and understanding of societal structures. As a result, evaluation is excluded from the analysis in this study. A text might be open to several interpretations depending on the socio-political context. This study is more interested in exploring participants' sensemaking processes and subjective experiences than their alignment with hegemonic discourses (which are difficult to determine). Since audience's readings are somewhat fluid and change over time and between different contexts, evaluating a momentary snapshot such as that of a focus group interview might oversimplify such dynamics. More importantly, readings in a discursive mode are not inherently oppositional or counter-hegemonic (Michelle, 2009, p. 159). Instead, this thesis focuses solely on denotative and connotative levels of meaning.

3.4 Affect and reception

At the beginning of this chapter, it was stated that this study perceives narrative as a mode of communication and a way of understanding and making sense of the world. Such an approach implies that reception is a process that may vary depending on different societal and political contexts. Wagnsson and Barzanje's (2021) notion of antagonistic narration, where an actor disperses critical or hostile information about another actor to inflict harm, becomes relevant as it seeks to exploit existing grievances and emotions.

The relationship between emotion and affect and strategic narratives has largely remained undertheorised. Miskimmon et al. (2013) write that they perceive emotion as a component of a strategic narrative. The narratives do not

only present information about a problem and different actors and what should be done to resolve the problem, but they also ask the reader to judge the importance and urgency, the characters of the actors involved and what kind of future would be desirable. Thus, narratives engage us on an emotional level (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 112). In a later study, the authors note actors' emotional investment in identities and the stickiness of a narrative, which occurs when that actor as an object to be encountered becomes imbued with affect (Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2019, p. 271). However, they still focus more on the narrative and articulated feelings about the actor than on the process or reception. The authors also do not describe how they perceive the relationship between affect and emotion or the role of affect in the reception of strategic narratives.

Previous studies have explored how emotion is used in the projection of Russian strategic narratives (Crisley & Chatterje-Doody, 2020; Grigor [Khaldarova] & Pantti, 2021; Hansson et al., 2023; Ventsel et al., 2021), focusing on narratives in the form of visual images as an affective and emotional force in times of war and conflict. They found that visuals were used as affective anchors to reactivate collective memory and dominant discourses and construct emotional relationships between an audience and a mediated event. Discourses of blame and fear also trigger emotional reactions by engaging people's cultural memory. Importantly, they found that emotions can stir up in audiences without making emotional statements or expressing blame themselves but by presenting narratives where actors blame each other. What these studies seem to lack is an explicit focus on the reception of strategic narratives and how emotions influence our perception of a narrative. While they acknowledge that narratives might activate collective memories, they have not tested this notion empirically by studying reception.

This study includes ideas from affect theory to illustrate what moves a reader between different modes of reception and between denotative and connotative levels of meaning when making sense of a narrative. Doing so helps account for the complex ways in which emotions influence the circulation and reception of strategic narratives in a hybrid media ecology, particularly when polarisation and securitisation shape and intensify affective responses. It also enables a nuanced understanding of how emotions mediate engagement with narratives.

Compared to psychoanalytical approaches, where affect mainly is defined as arousal wherein cognitive and physical aspects interact, a cultural studies and media perspective is shaped by a social and cultural understanding of affect and emotion following Williams' notion of "structures of feelings" (Williams, 1961, 2015). Williams describes how institutional structures act as constraints while new forms of social and cultural interactions emerge through everyday lived experiences.

The study of affect and emotion has been of central interest in cultural studies (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). In media and communication studies, there

has also been an interest in the social and cultural formation of affect and emotions, especially how they are produced by and communicated through the media and what forms of emotions audiences develop while using media (Döveling & Konijn, 2010; Lünenborg & Maier, 2018; Lünenborg & Röttger-Rössler, 2024).

There are no universally shared definitions of affect and emotion. Some researchers treat them synonymously, while others distinguish them theoretically. For example, Ahmed (2004b) does not separate emotion and affect, stating that such a separation is only analytic and overlooks how even unconscious experiences are shaped by past events. She proposes that even seemingly immediate responses draw upon memories embedded in the body and bypass our conscious awareness. Emotions, however, are not only internal to the individual body but are socially constructed and circulate between bodies and shape collective experiences (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 9).

Papacharissi (2016), on the other hand, follows Massumi (2002), who describes affect as intensity.

Affect is not emotion. It is the intensity with which we experience emotion. It is the slight tap on our foot when we hear a song but have not yet cognitively processed that we like it. It is the phatic nod we produce when we are listening along to what someone is saying, but we have not yet decided whether we fully agree or not. (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 316)

Similarly, it is the difference between me poking you and me pushing you – the same gesture but different intensity, revealing different intentions and a different outcome. Affect can also be described as the sense of movement or impulse felt before we consciously recognise and label it as a specific emotion.

The word ‘emotion’ comes from the Latin *emovere*, ‘to move, to move out’. Papacharissi and Ahmed explore the social nature of affect and focus on how affect circulates between individuals and groups, emphasising the collective dimension of affect. It is not understood as an individual phenomenon but as shared, transmitted and shaped collectively.

Papacharissi is particularly interested in affect in relation to the media. Affect in this case is less about individual emotion and more about collective feelings that emerge in digital places. Similar to Ahmed’s understanding, affect is seen as fleeting and as circulating in digital networks. Papacharissi (2014) also connects storytelling with emotions and affect. Emotions help the reader make sense and create meaning of narratives within their own personal and cultural contexts. People respond affectively and invest their emotions in narratives, which illustrates why certain narratives stick and are saturated with affect when used in a certain way, again and again until the use becomes intrinsic and a form of signing (Ahmed, 2004b; Cavalcante, 2018). Narratives also connect people and make them feel close to some and distant from others. Social media, in turn, facilitates feelings of engagement (Papacharissi, 2014).

News media reproduce affective narratives. Papacharissi (2019) notes that affect is not an event but a way for people to sense their way through a story. She writes that it becomes problematic when affect is reported *as* the event. This way, tweets can instantly become headlines without fact-checking or editorial insight. “We hear one liners filled with alarming intensity, but never receive more substance” (p. 2). These one-liners are then repeated over and over again to lull us into agreement or indignation to the point where we produce affective reactions of our own. This can lead us to turn off the news and avoid social media. This use of affect can be very successful in sustaining feelings of community. These feelings can either reflexively drive a movement forward or keep audiences in a form of engaged passivity – a lot of intensity but no movement or release. Presenting the conflict in a dramatic and intensive manner increases the chances that they are picked up by journalists, as the attention economy drives the news (Papacharissi, 2019).

This study is inspired by Ahmed’s perception of emotions as aligning individuals with collectives through the very intensity of their attachments. Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, researchers need to consider how they work to mediate the relationship between the individual and the collective (Ahmed, 2004a, pp. 26–27). For example, negative emotions or bad feelings are collectively generated, circulated and attached to particular groups or individuals. Thus, it is not just about feeling bad but also about who becomes the object and subject of that feeling at the moment of its declaration (Ahmed, 2005). How we feel about others also aligns us as a collective (Ahmed, 2004a).

Finally, as discussed in the news media repertoire section, there is a dichotomy where rationality and emotion are seen as opposing forces within human thinking and decision-making. It is often assumed that rationality involves logical and objective thinking, whereas emotion is subjective and impulsive. This study sides with Papacharissi (2014, p. 134), claiming that emotion and logic are not endpoints of a continuum but coexist and work together. Logic and reasoning help us make sense of our emotions and help understand why we feel a certain way, which, in turn, can help us process that feeling. Emotions give meaning to logic and add significance and depth to logical thoughts, making them more personally meaningful. In this way, emotions can also motivate or contextualise our reasoning, allowing us to engage with it on a deeper level. Affect, again, is not emotion but the intensity with which we experience both reason and emotion. Affect also allows us to connect thoughts and feelings rather than seeing them as separate or opposed. Going back to ‘structures of feelings’, Williams suggests that logic and emotion contribute to shared ways of interpreting and feeling specific to different places or cultures. They are seen as collective frameworks through which people make sense of different events. What is important, however, is how people can resist ideological control and manipulation that exploits emotions while still allowing affect and reason to coexist in meaningful, democratic ways (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 12).

Summary of the theoretical framework

To summarise this chapter, this section will provide a concise overview of how these theoretical concepts and perspectives are used and combined in this study. The focus is on the projection and reception of strategic narratives, centring on reception. It relies on the strategic narrative framework developed by Miskimmon et al. and the reception model developed by Michelle. Cross-media use and affect theory are included to describe how narratives manage to persuade and how audiences make sense of strategic narratives.

The theories of strategic narratives, reception, media use and affect come from different fields. Yet, they all have in common that they perceive the individual as an active agent in how narratives are structured, circulated and consumed. They also recognise audiences' active role in making sense of media content, as they play an active role in the communication process. Participants have the agency to accept, reject or reinterpret narratives based on their beliefs and values, and they actively negotiate meaning and exercise agency in their interpretations of narratives. The theories also recognise the complexity of audience responses and acknowledge the influence of contextual factors on the reception process. These theories are also based on a social constructionist ontology, meaning that reality is seen as socially constructed and individuals actively create their reality through social interactions.

The theories are combined in the theoretical framework and are used to analyse the empirical material in the following way: first, this study operationalises Roselle et al.'s (2014) components that comprise a strategic narrative consisting of actors, settings, conflicts and resolutions to identify strategic narratives in policy documents and media material. To study the projection of these narratives and the relationship between participants' particular modes of reception, their cross-media use is included as an important social and cultural factor. Doing so helps obtain a better overview of the type of media ecology in which these strategic narratives are projected and received, and it helps map connections between participants' news media repertoires and perception of media and their sensemaking process. Finally, to study how young Russian speakers react to, make sense of and discuss these strategic narratives (in the form of chosen media texts from Sputnik Latvia), this study relies on Michelle's (2007) reception model to look at denotative and connotative levels of how participants understand and discuss the media texts. To illustrate how participants move between different modes to interpret different narratives, this study also includes affect theory. Together, these theories contribute to a more complex and nuanced frame for understanding how narrative persuasion works and how people in a specific context make sense of strategic narratives.

4 Methodological framework

This chapter clarifies the motivations behind the different methods, the considerations made when selecting media materials and documents, the recruitment of participants for the focus groups and interviews, how the methods were implemented and how the collected data was analysed. The chapter begins with presenting the study's onto-epistemological foundation. Next, the empirical work is presented with arguments for the chosen methods of data collection and a description of how the analysis was performed. Finally, ethics and self-reflexivity are discussed together with the limitations of the methods.

4.1 A social constructionist approach

This study adopts a social constructionist perspective, which posits that reality and knowledge are not inherently given but are constructed through an individual's social, cultural and historical context. Consequently, the analytical results reflect a social constructionist framework shaped by the researcher's position as an integral part of the social world under investigation (Alvesson, 2009; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Burr, 2015). The interviews were approached as active social processes in which meaning is collaboratively constructed and shaped (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interviews, however, are not merely conversations. Guided by specific research objectives, the interviewer maintains a degree of control and initiative. Interviews therefore represent constructed data rather than naturally occurring phenomena (Silverman, 2011).

4.2 Data collection methods

This study combined documents, focus groups and individual interviews. To answer sub-question 1 – *How are Russian strategic narratives about Latvia projected in Sputnik Latvia?* – a document analysis of Russian foreign policy concepts, press briefing statements and texts from state-controlled media was conducted. Focus groups and individual follow-up interviews were conducted to answer sub-questions 2 and 3: *In what ways do young Russian speakers in Latvia perceive and navigate the media ecology in which these strategic*

narratives are projected? And Given the media context, what reception modes are prevalent among young Russian speakers, and how are they linked to a) the mapped media repertoires and, in turn, to b) position taking in relation to the strategic narratives? Focus groups and individual interviews were combined to explore how participants engage with and interpret strategic narratives in both group and individual settings. This approach ensured data completeness as each method revealed different parts of the phenomenon under study and provided a more comprehensive understanding (Lambert & Loisel, 2008).

Analysing documents and media materials from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and state-controlled Sputnik Latvia allowed me to identify and analyse strategic narratives that I then used as discussion material in the interviews for this study. This step also provided me with an understanding of how Russia narrates Latvia in their international communication.

Focus groups allowed me to observe how people make sense of narratives through conversation and interaction in a way that is closer to, albeit not identical with, how we form opinions and understandings in our everyday lives. Generating meanings and interpretations of media content is naturally a social activity, and audiences form their interpretations and opinions about such content through conversations and social interaction (Peters & Schröder, 2018; Stewart, 2007). Focus groups generate discussion and reveal the meanings people read into the discussion topic and how they negotiate those meanings (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). The focus groups also helped to determine the most pertinent questions to explore further during individual follow-up interviews with focus group participants.

Individual follow-up interviews complemented the focus groups by exploring personal experiences in depth, providing the opportunity to ask follow-up questions that, for different reasons, were not covered in the focus group discussions. As Michel (1999, p. 36) stated, the combination of focus groups and interviews can be described as “telling how it is and telling how it feels”. On the one hand, focus groups can generate a wider range of views and ideas than could be captured through an individual interview. On the other hand, interviews can produce more detail and offer more insight into a participant’s thoughts, feelings and lifeworld (Guest et al., 2017). At the same time, participants could be more comfortable sharing personal and perhaps sensitive information in a group setting among individuals with a similar cultural background than in a more intimate setting with an interviewer from a different cultural background.

In the following sections, the data collection methods used in this study will be described in more detail.

4.2.1 Foreign policy documents and media texts

The first stage consisted of collecting media materials to answer the first sub-question: *How are Russian strategic narratives about Latvia projected in Sputnik Latvia?* The decision to analyse Russian narratives was made for three reasons. First, to gain familiarity with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' communication explicitly focusing on Russian speakers in Latvia. Second, the strategic dimension was identified as crucial for the study, with narratives understood as tools to promote foreign policy objectives. Consequently, Russian foreign policy documents and press briefing statements from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs mentioning Latvia were collected, in addition to media texts in Sputnik Latvia. Third, given that previous research on Russian strategic narratives primarily had examined English-language materials, this study emphasises the importance of analysing Russian-language materials specifically targeting a Russian-speaking audience.

A purposive sample was used for this study and a period of 18 months was selected, covering October 2019 through March 2021. Official documents were downloaded as PDFs from the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (<https://mid.ru>). The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation from 2016² and reports on bilateral agreements between Russia and Latvia were collected. Russia's Foreign Policy Concept is a key official document that outlines the strategic goals and guiding principles of Russia's foreign policy. This document was included as it serves as a comprehensive statement of how the Russian government perceives its place in the world, the international order and how it intends to engage with other states and global issues.

Statements from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs were collected using the search word "latv*" on their website to find documents mentioning Latvia. The first search resulted in 165 documents. Documents only briefly mentioning Latvia among other countries were excluded. Latvia was mentioned as a key point in 23 press briefings and was brought up in three additional press briefings during the Q&A session with journalists. Latvia was also mentioned in eight comments, published as separate documents. In total, 34 documents were sampled from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These texts were formal and structured communication, typically delivered by the spokesperson Maria Zakharova, and they provided insight into how the Russian government wishes to present itself on the international stage. The documents offer a snapshot of the government's immediate reaction to current events and international developments, and by studying them, it was possible to track how Russia constructs narratives in real time.

² Russia has since issued a new Foreign Policy Concept as of 2023 (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023).

Initially, RT and Sputnik Latvia were included in the study as sources of Russian strategic narratives and major media outlets backed by the Russian government. RT was excluded from the analysis, however, due to practical considerations. It primarily targets an English-speaking audience, and fewer articles are available on RT. Focusing on Sputnik Latvia provided a more substantial and relevant dataset for examining Russian strategic narratives targeting the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia. Although Sputnik Latvia might not be popular among Russian-speaking youth, it was highly relevant to study as previous research shows that RT and Sputnik are sometimes conceptualised as discursive launchpads, meaning that their narrative content is often dispersed more widely via social media, YouTube platforms, Russia-affiliated ‘internet troll armies’ or by local media outlets, resulting in the repetition and amplification of these messages (Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2018). Their narratives can, therefore, reach far wider audiences than just the active consumers of RT and Sputnik, which already before the ban were thought to be fairly few (Crilley et al., 2020), and they may thus distort Latvia’s Russian speakers’ perceptions of their own domestic political reality.

For this material, the same 18-month period from 2019 to 2021 was selected, and texts were collected from Sputnik Latvia’s Russian language version³³ (<https://lv.sputniknews.ru>). Texts using the tag “Latvia” were collected. The first search resulted in 8 960 texts. Since Sputnik Latvia produced such a large amount of content, texts from the website were sampled based on the publication of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ press briefings. Texts published the day before, the same day, and the day after a press briefing were collected. In total, texts covering a period of 102 days were collected from Sputnik Latvia.

The first sorting of the material resulted in 335 texts. The sample was narrowed down further by selecting texts that directly connected to the Russian press releases, resulting in 80 texts. Texts that only briefly mentioned Latvia among other countries and those that presented sports results were excluded. In total, 79 texts directly connected to the press briefings during 2019–2021 were sampled. The sample was intentionally focused and prioritised texts directly connected to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which aligned with the aim of this study. Given the focus on the reception of Russian strategic narratives among Russian-speaking youth in Latvia, the selected media texts and official documents, combined with insights from previous research, provide a robust and sufficient foundation to achieve the study’s objectives. The analysis of the texts is described in section 4.3 Analysis of the material.

³³ Before Sputnik Latvia was banned in March 2022, there was both a Russian and a Latvian language version of the website.

4.2.2 Focus groups

Focus group interviews were this study's main data collection method. They were used together with individual follow-up interviews to answer the third sub-question: *Given the media context, what reception modes are prevalent among young Russian speakers, and how are they linked to a) the mapped media repertoires and, in turn, to b) position taking in relation to the strategic narratives?*

Focus groups are a qualitative method with a long tradition in media and communication studies. From the beginning, focus groups were used by survey and marketing researchers. In the 1940s they were adopted by Merton and Lazarsfeld to study the reactions to wartime propaganda (Hollander, 2004). Focus groups were later used to explore the effects of particular media, such as television or film, and are often used in reception research to study people's meaning-making (Liebes & Katz, 1986; Morley, 1980).

The 'focus' in the focus group refers to one subject taking centre stage, which the participants are encouraged to discuss. The method was chosen for this study due to its ability to study the interactive processes by which meaning is socially constructed through everyday talk (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Stewart, 2007), which occurs collectively rather than individually. The method also generates a rich understanding of the experiences and beliefs of participants (Kitzinger, 1995). Focus groups are arranged with several participants present, so less time is spent on each individual. However, one gets access to group interaction processes when participants share, compare and defend their views with and against each other (Kitzinger, 1995).

Focus groups generate discussion and reveal the meanings that participants read into the discussion topic and how they negotiate those meanings (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). They usually increase the depth of inquiry and unveil aspects of the phenomenon that otherwise are assumed to be less accessible (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). In the focus groups, I could follow how participants questioned and commented on each other's experiences. Focus groups also accentuate participants' similarities and differences and give rich information about a range of perspectives and experiences. Warr (2005) nicely described the focus group discussion as "a mixture of personal beliefs and available collective narratives that are flavoured by the local circumstances of participants' lives" (p. 200).

The sampling and selection of focus group participants followed a combination of purposeful, maximum variation and snowball sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). This study focuses on 18–30-year-old Russian speakers living in Riga, Daugavpils and Liepāja. Participants were recruited through advertisements on Facebook and Instagram, with socio-demographic factors such as language, age and place of residence in mind (see Appendix IV). The advertisement was shared in relevant Facebook groups, and different

organisations involved with youth in Latvia were contacted and asked to share the advertisement.

All participants had to fill in a short survey (see Appendix V). The purpose of the survey was to collect contact information to potential research participants, and it was used to put together different focus groups based on factors such as age, level of education and occupation. People who met the criteria were then contacted by email and provided with additional information. To ensure that participants to the greatest extent possible approached the focus groups with an open mind, deliberate decisions were made regarding pre-group inquiries. Questions about political views or media use were omitted to minimise preconceived biases. Participants were also not categorised by nationality or ethnicity; only the language used at home was requested. Consequently, minimal prior information about the participants was collected. This approach facilitated spontaneous and unfiltered responses free from external categorisations that could shape them. Between 2021 and 2022, 135 individuals completed the survey, and 69 participated in 12 focus groups conducted in Riga, Daugavpils and Liepāja.

Purposeful sampling rests on the assumption that certain participants will be particularly relevant for understanding a phenomenon. In contrast, maximum variation sampling enables a broader understanding of the conditions influencing the reception of strategic narratives. Groups of men and women of different occupations were put together to achieve variation. When conducting focus groups where a group of strangers is put together, they should have something in common. Therefore, an effort was made to group participants by age so that ideally, one group consisted of 28–30-year-olds and another group of 18–21-year-olds. This strategy also helped avoid the risk of an older participant dominating the group discussion. When talking to younger people, age is usually more important and sometimes sensitive (Krueger & Casey, 2015, p. 432).

The recruitment process encountered several challenges, prompting snowball sampling to ensure sufficient participation. Just days before the first focus groups were scheduled in Riga in the autumn of 2021, the Latvian authorities announced a strict lockdown with curfews due to a surge in Covid-19 cases. This meant that the planned interviews had to be cancelled and postponed. While conducting the interviews online would have been an option, previous research during the pandemic highlighted the limitations of virtual focus groups, particularly in facilitating natural group interaction. As a result, re-scheduling in-person sessions was prioritised, and online focus groups were considered a last resort (Abrams et al., 2015; Bolin et al., 2023; Tuttas, 2015).

Fortunately, Latvia reopened, allowing the successful re-recruitment of most participants. It is important to acknowledge, however, that government policies in 2021 required participants in the first four focus groups in Riga to present a valid vaccination certificate. This policy influenced the sample, as some individuals who were interested in participating were unvaccinated

because they either had not yet been able to get the vaccine or chose not to be vaccinated.

By 2022, the vaccination requirement was lifted, but recruitment in Daugavpils and Liepāja faced additional challenges following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This event intensified societal shifts in Latvia, including the removal of Soviet monuments and a reduction in the use of the Russian language in public spaces. These changes significantly impacted the overall well-being of Russian speakers in Latvia, further complicating the recruitment process.

In the spring of 2022, snowball sampling was employed in Daugavpils by encouraging participants who already had been recruited to invite a Russian-speaking friend to join the focus group. This approach successfully facilitated the recruitment of four focus groups in Daugavpils. By the autumn of 2022, however, this strategy proved insufficient; interest in the study was low, and on the day a focus group was scheduled, half of the participants who had signed up called in sick, resulting in a 'mini group' of only three participants.

Discussions with Latvian experts confirmed it was increasingly difficult to recruit Russian-speaking participants for focus groups, particularly in Liepāja, which posed significant challenges even for local researchers. To address this challenge, collaboration was established with a local school in Liepāja, where the two final focus groups were conducted with 18-year-old high school students. Unlike the previous groups, these were 'natural groups' where participants were already acquainted. As Leask et al. (2001) noted, natural groups tend to exhibit greater consensus-making, as observed in the study. Nonetheless, the two groups provided valuable insights, including individuals who would likely not have participated in the study outside of a school setting.

According to Leask et al. (2001), a key advantage of constructed groups is that participants, knowing they are unlikely to meet again, face less personal costs in expressing divergent views, which encourages greater honesty. In some cases, however, participants in the constructed focus groups knew each other, either as friends or as partners. This occurred when snowball sampling was employed as a pragmatic solution to recruitment challenges throughout 2022.

In general, the focus groups consisted of 3–7 participants. When putting together different focus groups, it is advised to avoid composing too heterogeneous groups and instead conduct different homogeneous focus groups with 3–6 participants in each group (Kitzinger, 1995). Participants were grouped based on age; other than that, the groups were as heterogeneous as possible. A total of 12 focus groups were conducted: four groups in Riga in the autumn of 2021, four in Daugavpils in the spring of 2022 and four in Liepāja in the

autumn of 2022. The gender balance was 44 per cent men and 56 per cent women. All focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.⁴

All 12 focus groups were held in Russian to ensure rich and extensive responses in the participants' native language. A professional Russian-speaking moderator from the Latvian research company SKDS facilitated the discussions. I followed the discussion, asked follow-up questions and took notes. The decision to engage an external moderator was based on three key considerations. First, my proficient but not fluent Russian language skills could have influenced the group interaction between participants and resulted in a loss of important data. Second, the Russian-speaking Latvian moderator brought critical knowledge of the local context, and the moderator's perceived background likely enriched the group discussions, as moderators' identities can shape participants' interactions (Edley & Litosseliti, 2010). Third, methodological best practices recommend separating the roles of moderator and observer, allowing the moderator to focus on guiding the discussion while another observer tracks participant interactions and responses. Additionally, note-taking during the session was instrumental in facilitating accurate transcription and identifying speakers.

The interview guide and discussion material were created and selected by the author. Preparation meetings were held with the professional moderator where we discussed the interview guide, the focus group procedures, the project's goal and so on, and we also signed a data processing agreement. I was present during all 12 focus groups, welcomed participants, presented the project, informed participants about the procedure and explained that the interview would be recorded. I also had printed consent forms that participants signed before the interview started. Throughout the focus group sessions, I took notes and occasionally asked follow-up questions, ensuring that all aspects were covered. This way, I could also pay attention to what was happening in the room, notice people's body language and ensure that the discussion was not going in a different direction than we had agreed before the interview.

The focus groups lasted 120 minutes on average and followed a semi-structured interview guide. At the beginning of the focus group interviews, participants had to write their names⁵ on paper and introduce themselves. Before the interview, everyone also had to choose an item from a basket full of items provided by SKDS (which had everything from books, make-up and toys to sports gear and cleaning supplies) that they thought represented them in some way and were to tell the other participants about it when introducing themselves. The first question was open, and they discussed media use: What media did they use, what was important when deciding what media to use, and in

⁴ A Russian-speaking Uppsala University intern helped transcribe the first four focus group interviews. The person signed a data processing agreement.

⁵ Participants were encouraged to write any name they wanted and were ensured to be given pseudonyms in the dissertation.

what language did they consume news? There was also a question about what they had heard or read about Latvia and Russian speakers in Latvia in the media lately. This part served as a warm-up for the reception part, where three strategic narratives were introduced.

The Sputnik Latvia texts were introduced one by one without mentioning the outlet, and the participants had some time to read the text before discussing it (see Appendix III for an English translation of the media texts). What was their first impression? Were they familiar with this story? Did they discuss this story with family and friends? What did they think about the text itself and how it was written? The decision was made to not introduce the source of the text, but it was not kept a secret if participants asked. The focus was more on it being a text written for a Russian-speaking audience. Texts from Sputnik Latvia were copied and pasted into a Word document so that participants could focus on the text rather than the source. Having discussed all three narratives, the discussion was concluded by returning to their feelings about being Russian speakers in Latvia. Did they recognise themselves in these stories? For whom did they believe these texts were written?

Table 1. Overview of the focus groups that were carried out for this study

Number	Group size	Age	Interview date	Length	City
1	3 women 4 men	28–30	16.11.2021	120 min	Riga
2	4 women 2 men	25–29	17.11.2021	116 min	Riga
3	5 women 2 men	19–24	23.11.2021	87 min	Riga
4	3 women 2 men	24–30	25.11.2021	98 min	Riga
5	3 women 1 man	26–29	28.05.2022	79 min	Daugavpils
6	4 women 1 man	18–21	28.05.2022	71 min	Daugavpils
7	3 women 4 men	18–30	29.05.2022	115 min	Daugavpils
8	3 women 4 men	23–30	29.05.2022	98 min	Daugavpils
9	2 women 1 man	21–22	9.10.2022	112 min	Liepāja
10	2 women 2 men	18–29	9.10.2022	86 min	Liepāja
11	3 women 4 men	18	10.10.2022	52 min	Liepāja
12	4 women 3 men	18	10.10.2022	53 min	Liepāja

The focus groups were conducted during different time periods. The first four focus groups were conducted in Riga in November 2021 and were affected by the pandemic and lockdown. The following four focus groups in Daugavpils were conducted six months later, in May 2022, after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. All Russian-based media in Latvia had been banned and a decision had been made to remove all monuments glorifying the Soviet Union in Latvia. Finally, the last four focus groups in Liepāja were conducted five months later in October 2022 (almost a full year after the first groups in Riga), when Latvia had closed its border to Russia and stopped granting resident permits to Russians. Discussions were held in the Latvian parliament on whether to forbid the use of the Russian language altogether in Latvia.

One criticism or concern of focus groups (especially at times of war) is social desirability bias and that participants would say what the moderator wants to hear or self-censor due to other focus group participants. Not wanting to disclose certain information about oneself is not a big concern, however, as from a social constructionist perspective, there is no underlying truth that may be hidden or concealed. Instead, participants were expected to tailor their responses to the demands of the situation (Edley & Litosseliti, 2010; Hollander, 2004). Conformity, groupthink and social desirability pressures are not seen as obscuring the data. Rather, they *are* the data, because they are important elements of everyday interaction (Hollander, 2004). Focus groups proved highly appropriate to study such a sensitive phenomenon, as participants often supported one another in self-disclosure. This dynamic fostered openness and shared insights that would have been difficult to achieve in individual interviews (Kitzinger, 1994; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996).

4.2.3 Individual interviews

The individual follow-up interviews served as a complement to the focus group interviews. Besides discussing narratives, they were used to answer the second sub-question: *In what ways do young Russian speakers in Latvia perceive and navigate the media ecology in which these strategic narratives are projected?*

Interviews and focus groups are closely related but distinct qualitative methods. Interviews are more common in media and communication studies and could be described as “a face-to-face verbal interchange, in which one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information or expressions of opinion or belief from another person” (Maccoby & Maccoby, 1954, p. 449). An interview is literally an inter-view, an interchange of views between two persons (Kvale, 1996). Individual interviews are usually less lively than focus groups, but they offered an opportunity for the participants to elaborate on comments made during the focus group discussion, fill in gaps in their contribution and describe thoughts or memories evoked by the discussion (Hollander, 2004).

Individual follow-up interviews were conducted for several reasons. One was to ask questions of a more personal nature, where an individual interview allows for more confidentiality. While focus groups helped catalogue the range of participants' experiences, individual interviews contributed to the detailing of these experiences. Focus groups provided collective meanings of a phenomenon, whereas individual interviews provided personal experiences, thus generating different levels of meaning better than any one level of meaning alone (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). Another reason was to make room for participants who had dissenting views, as group dynamics inevitably occurred in the focus groups. Some participants exerted more influence than others in a group situation, making disagreement between participants less visible due to group pressure (Brinkmann, 2013). The follow-up interviews gave the participants more space to develop their thoughts.

Following maximum variation sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017), where the purpose is to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, participants were selected who had different opinions on the topic, were of different ages and had different occupations. On the one hand, having focus groups facilitated the recruitment, as people already had expressed an interest in participating in the research project. On the other hand, getting people to participate a second time could also be a challenge, which was the case in Liepāja in the autumn of 2022.

Initially, the interviews were planned to take place relatively soon after the focus groups, but due to the pandemic, follow-up interviews with Riga participants were postponed and conducted in June 2022, seven months after the first focus groups. Follow-up interviews with Daugavpils participants were held in September 2022, four months after the focus groups. Interviews were held in Liepāja less than a month after the focus groups, which in combination with the societal circumstances due to the war might have resulted in a lower interest in doing a follow-up interview.

In total, 13 individual follow-up interviews were conducted: five in Riga, five in Daugavpils and three in Liepāja. Interviews were held at universities in Riga, Daugavpils and Liepāja. Six men and seven women participated. The interviews lasted, on average, 90 minutes and followed a semi-structured interview guide. The individual interviews were all held in Russian and were carried out by the author. All individual interviews were recorded and I transcribed them verbatim myself.

Inspired by narrative interviewing (Horsdal, 2016), I listened actively, used non-verbal encouragement and tried to avoid interrupting the interviewees before they were finished telling their story. The interviewees talked about themselves, their family background and what it was like for them to live as a Russian speaker in Latvia. I asked them about their media use, news consumption, and how recent events connected to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine had affected or changed how they perceive the media and how they consume

news. We also discussed the three texts used in the focus groups and whether their perception had changed since they participated in the focus group.

Table 2. Overview of the interviews that were carried out for this study

Number	Pseudo-nym	Age	Media use	Interview date	Length	City
1	Viktor	30	Heavy user	13.06.2022	110 min	Riga
2	Sofiya	21	Heavy user	15.06.2022	84 min	Riga
3	Emiliya	24	Algorithmic user	15.06.2022	92 min	Riga
4	Klara	25	Selective user	16.06.2022	85 min	Riga
5	Vadim	29	Heavy user	17.06.2022	98 min	Riga
6	Ofeliya	19	Selective user	19.09.2022	93 min	Daugavpils
7	Pyotr	24	Heavy user	19.09.2022	103 min	Daugavpils
8	Nikolai	27	News avoider	21.09.2022	101 min	Daugavpils
9	Varya	30	News avoider	23.09.2022	127 min	Daugavpils
10	Liza	22	Selective user	28.09.2022	99 min	Daugavpils
11	Valentin	20	Heavy user	26.10.2022	93 min	Liepāja
12	Konstantin	21	Heavy user	27.10.2022	91 min	Liepāja
13	Susanna	23	Heavy user	2.11.2022	102 min	Liepāja

This section briefly introduces the 13 participants who took part in follow-up interviews after the focus groups. It includes details about their backgrounds, such as their upbringing, family origins, interests and perceived identities. While some participants feature more prominently in subsequent chapters than others, their quotes are presented as illustrative examples drawn from the broader empirical material.

Viktor, 30, from Riga, with grandparents from Moscow and Siberia, worked as an engineer and had a deep interest in Russian culture. He enjoyed travelling, sports and reading books. Viktor identified as European and was born a non-citizen but later obtained Latvian citizenship.

Sofiya, 21, was a university student from Riga with family roots in Siberia. She enjoyed travelling and spending time with friends. While her parents held conservative views, Sofiya identified as European and embraced more progressive values.

Emiliya, 24, from Riga, had family roots in Latvia, Estonia and Russia. She worked for a state agency, was politically active and volunteered for a veterans' organisation. Emiliya identified as European.

Klara, 25, an artist born in Belarus, moved to Riga with her family as a toddler. A non-citizen with a deep interest in Latvian culture, she loved travelling and identified as European.

Vadim, 29, from Riga, worked in IT and had a background in journalism studies in Russia. A non-citizen with Belarusian roots, he was deeply interested in politics, particularly military issues, but did not express a clear identification.

Ofeliya, 19, from Daugavpils, moved to Riga for her studies after graduating from school. She enjoyed sports and socialising with friends, and she was interested in art. Although she identified as Russian, she recently began questioning this. She had roots in Lithuania.

Pyotr, 24, was a university student in Riga, originally from Daugavpils. He recently became a parent and had family ties to Lithuania. Pyotr enjoyed sports and identified as a Russian-speaking Old Believer.

Nikolai, 27, from Daugavpils, identified as Russian, as did his parents. A non-citizen and Old Believer, he had lived abroad and enjoyed sports and playing computer games.

Varya, 30, from Daugavpils, was a parent and entrepreneur running her own business. She enjoyed travelling, had lived abroad and was Catholic, although her mother was an Old Believer. With relatives in Russia, Varya identified as neither Latvian nor Russian.

Liza, 22, from Daugavpils, moved to Riga for her studies after graduating from school. She came from a family with Polish roots with relatives in Russia. She enjoyed interior design, playing computer games and doing sports. She did not identify with only one nationality.

Valentin, 20, an engineer from Liepāja, was considering moving abroad like his parents. He liked music and sports, had attended a Latvian school and had relatives in Central Asia. He did not identify with only one nationality.

Konstantin, 21, was a university student born in Siberia. He moved to Latvia with his family as a toddler. He was politically active, identified as a patriotic Latvian and recently applied for Latvian citizenship.

Susanna, 23, from Liepāja, studied in Riga and enjoyed computer games, books and films. Her parents were born in Kazakhstan and Ukraine, and her relatives were spread across the world, including Russia. Susanna identified as a Russian-speaking Latvian citizen.

These participants represent a purposive sample to achieve maximum variety in age, education, occupation, news media repertoires, family background and opinions shared during the focus group discussions.

4.3 Analysis of the material

Given the diverse data collection methods employed in this study, which generated different types of data, it was appropriate and necessary to use a combination of analytical approaches. An analysis inspired by Roselle et al.'s (2014) strategic narrative framework was conducted to identify strategic narratives in media texts. To study how participants made sense of the identified strategic narratives, a reception analysis using Michelle's (2007) reception model was conducted on the interview transcripts, emphasising the focus group data. A thematic analysis was conducted to study participants' news media repertoires (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with a particular focus on the individual interview data. How the data was approached is described in more detail below.

4.3.1 Analysing the documents

Before being subjected to analysis, all documents from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Sputnik Latvia were manually downloaded one by one. They were saved as separate files on the computer and converted into Word format to enable full NVivo capabilities. They were also screened for irrelevant and duplicated news items. The 113 texts (34 documents and 79 media texts) were read in their entirety several times during the coding process.

The reading of the Foreign Policy Concept and bilateral agreements was based on a document analysis (Bowen, 2009), which here involved skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination) and interpretation and was an iterative process. Policy documents were analysed to identify the strategic objectives, laying the foundation for a thorough examination of press briefing statements and media texts, focusing on texts from Sputnik Latvia. When analysing the press briefing statements and media texts, a deductive thematic analysis was used based on the components developed by Roselle et al. (2014) as preexisting codes when going through the material. The codes are presented below. The tools component was excluded from the analysis for practical reasons and was covered naturally. Notably, the essence of the tools component is naturally integrated into the broader framework of the study, making its explicit inclusion redundant.

Table 3. Questions posed to the data and codes

Questions posed to the data	Code
Who are the actors involved?	Actors
What constitutes the stage? Where is the action taking place?	Setting
What is the problem posed? What are the reasons behind the problem?	Conflict
What are the suggested solutions?	Resolution

When analysing the foreign policy documents and the media texts, the focus was mainly on the following components of a strategic narrative:

Actors. This analytical step examines the role of the actor. It places considerable focus on the relationality of parts, selective appropriation and the actor’s agency, with a focus on causal emplotment. What places and roles do the actors have in the plot? Who are the victims/heroes/villains/fools? An analysis of actors and their agency can expose how the narrator inflicts harm by storying actors negatively – usually as villains and fools – while narrating others positively as heroes or treating them sympathetically as innocent victims.

Setting. This aspect focuses on how the world is depicted and how it is thought to work. What constitutes the stage? Where is the action taking place?

Conflict. The conflict is an important part of the strategic narrative. The problem or conflict also highlights the importance of temporality. What is posed as the problem? What is the reason for the problem? Who does what to whom or what?

Resolution. Narratives appeal to human beings partly due to the presentation of action to resolve a conflict or disrupt the status quo. What are the expected outcomes and suggested solutions to the problem?

While it is common to use several coders and test the consistency between them to ensure reliability, this project relied on one coder, the author. It was decided to analyse only textual information, meaning that visuals were left out. This could be a limitation, considering the importance of visual communication in influencing perceptions of global politics (Crilley et al., 2020; Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2020; van Noort & Chatterje-Doody, 2021). Nevertheless, it was possible to identify narratives from the gathered material also without visuals.

The findings of this analysis are presented in Chapter 5. Based on the analysis, three strategic narratives were chosen as discussion material for the focus groups, and they were in the form of three media texts from Sputnik Latvia. As texts that use a more intensive language were deemed better suited to

stimulate a focus group discussion, such texts were selected. The media texts were presented to the participants one at a time and were shared as Word documents, meaning that the participants did not know beforehand that the texts were from Sputnik Latvia. Images were also removed to emphasise the focus on the narrative itself. The three chosen texts pertain to history, freedom of speech and language, and they can be found in Appendix III. The following section describes how focus group and interview transcripts were analysed.

4.3.2 Analysing the interviews

Conducting research interviews in your third language is a strenuous process. All focus groups and individual interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were held in Russian, the participants' native language, as conducting interviews in English would seriously have affected the quality of the research data and, most probably, the willingness to participate in the study.

The interview transcripts were similar to the documents and media texts uploaded in NVivo. For the interviews, a hybrid inductive-deductive thematic analysis was applied (Proudfoot, 2023) in which the analysis is rooted in an explicit theoretical framework (the deductive element) but also incorporates the generation of themes from the data (the inductive element). Subsequently, these themes are combined in a hybrid manner, allowing for mutual enhancement without compromising structure or consistency. On a more practical level, the study was inspired by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach for thematic analysis.

The materials were read and re-read during the first step, writing down notes and ideas for codes. The analysis already started when the interviews were conducted and transcribed. Throughout the fieldwork in Latvia, I also kept notes where I reflected on the interviews and what was happening in Latvia during data collection. I wrote down initial summaries of the interviews and my interpretation of what participants shared in the focus groups and individual follow-up interviews.

The second phase consisted of generating initial codes, sometimes called initial coding (Saldaña, 2015), where I systematically worked through the material and coded text segments relevant to the sub-questions. The first round of coding and interpretation was already done at the data processing stage when I listened to the recorded interviews.

During the third phase, I merged different codes into potential themes. I used different approaches for the individual sub-questions. For the question of reception, the material was coded using Michelle's reception model (as described in depth in Chapter 3), which consists of different modes of reception. As such, the analysis focused on denotative and connotative levels of meaning and how participants made sense of the texts discussed in the focus groups. The results from this analysis are presented in Chapter 7 and 8. Inductive coding was used to focus on the data for the question on participants' news media

repertoires. The main themes are presented in Chapter 6. The coding of the focus groups and individual interviews was a cyclical and iterative process, going back and forth and zooming in and out of the material.

This study treated both focus group and interview transcripts equally in structuring and coding the material. While I acknowledge that these two methods generate different yet complementary types of data, the value of combining these two approaches lies in the opportunity to capture the full spectrum of participant perspectives. By analysing them together as one cohesive text, I could draw on the full range of insights, whether expressed individually or in a group setting. At the same time, I have strived to include quotes from focus group interactions while recognising individual voices (Kitzinger, 1995; Barbour, 2007).

The fourth phase consisted of reviewing the themes. This was particularly the case for news media repertoires and the reception analysis, as sections could be coded as one or two reception modes simultaneously, which was a way of keeping track of denotative and connotative levels of participants' reception. Some potential themes were eliminated during this stage, while others were merged. Given the richness of the empirical material, I made sure to keep the focus on my research questions and the aim of the study. Interesting findings that were beyond the scope of this thesis were boxed in and saved for possible future explorations.

Phase five consisted of clearly naming and defining the themes from phase four, particularly regarding news media repertoires. Finally, phase six was to write up the findings as presented throughout this thesis' analytical chapters and summarised in the conclusion.

4.4 Ethics and self-reflexivity

This study explored sensitive issues regarding the influence of strategic narratives and also touched upon questions of ethnicity and nationality while studying reception processes among a Russian-speaking minority group in Latvia. Therefore, I applied for ethical approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority. The application was completed as part of a doctoral course in research ethics at Uppsala University in the fall of 2020. The Swedish Ethical Review Authority approved the project at the beginning of 2021, before data collection started in Latvia. As such, the study followed the guidelines for conducting ethical research suggested by the Swedish Research Council (2017), and the application process served as a preparation for how the study would be implemented while ensuring that any potential harm to participants was kept to an absolute minimum.

Following good research practice, participants' personal information was handled according to GDPR jurisdiction. The participants were given

information about the research project before the focus groups and were informed that the interviews would be recorded. Information was also provided in written form when the informed consent documents were signed, which stated that personal data would be handled with confidentiality and that the participants would be given pseudonyms in the published material. It was also clarified that the material would be used only for research purposes and that all published material would be available to the participants (see Appendix I; cf. Sim & Waterfield, 2019; Smith, 1995).

Given the sensitive nature of this study, it was important to be as transparent as possible throughout the process. Therefore, it was decided to mention the interest in Russian strategic narratives and their influence up front in the advertisement (see Appendix IV), even though this could potentially scare off potential participants or prime participants who signed up for the study. It was better to be as transparent as possible than to provide limited information about the study, risking that participants would feel deceived or tricked in some way, especially in an already sensitive societal context as was the case during 2021–2022 when the interviews were conducted.

It is appropriate to highlight the strengths of this study. While some may question the decision to have participants read and discuss emotionally charged texts, such as those from Sputnik Latvia, this approach was highly revealing. After having engaged in discussions for up to two hours while being recorded, participants chose to stay for coffee or tea afterward, using the opportunity to debrief and reflect on the experience they had just shared. For most participants, this was the first time they participated in a research study. The importance of debriefing is well-documented in the methods literature on focus groups, but it was particularly significant in this case. Many participants expressed that this was one of the few occasions they could discuss topics typically considered taboo at home or among their Latvian peers. Through the focus group and individual follow-up interviews, they could share their experiences of being a young Russian speaker in Latvia, especially during a time when the Russian-speaking identity was undergoing significant change.

Interpretative and constructionist research is inherently subjective, which calls for reflexivity on the researcher's part. As such, I have reflected on my role as a researcher and how my background influences my understanding of the phenomena studied. I am Swedish and have grown up in Sweden. Although I have studied Russian for several years, both in Sweden and abroad, and possess advanced proficiency in the language, I do not claim fluency, nor can I fully grasp the experience of growing up as a young Russian speaker in Latvia. My high-level command of Russian, however, enabled me to conduct interviews in Russian and transcribe the material without difficulty. Additionally, having spent extended periods in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Armenia, I have a deep understanding of Russia's information influence in post-Soviet states.

This study makes the case that context is crucial for making sense of strategic narratives. Therefore, it was important for me to learn as much as possible about Latvia's history and relationship with Russia. Having a Latvian co-supervisor in Uppsala certainly helped, but I also spent more than half a year living in Latvia while conducting the interviews. While living in Latvia, I met with local experts to learn as much as possible about Latvian society and the existing research on Russian speakers in Latvia. I would also like to emphasise the strengths of being an outsider in this research. Not only did it require me to familiarise myself with the context and approach the topic with a fresh perspective, but it also led to the collection of exceptionally rich data. Participants were eager not only to share their opinions on the subject but also to ensure that I understood the broader context, particularly what it means to be a non-citizen or an Old Believer in Latvia. This openness and willingness to provide deeper insights enriched the overall findings.

4.5 Limitations of the study

A methodology chapter is not complete without mentioning the study's limitations. Initially, I wanted to conduct a pilot study before the focus groups. For various reasons, this was not possible. Instead, the interview guide went through numerous revisions and was discussed with supervisors, colleagues and the professional moderator at SKDS. Another limitation concerns the recruitment and self-selection bias. As with any qualitative research, there is always a limitation in that only people interested in participating in the research project will participate. Therefore, there is a risk that this project only studied participants who wanted to discuss this topic and were critical of the influence of Russian strategic narratives. Nevertheless, there were various opinions and standpoints among participants in the three different cities, described in Chapters 6, 7 and 8.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, recruitment in Liepāja was so difficult that it was decided to cooperate with a local school that offered to help. The final two focus groups were conducted there with 18-year-old high school students. These last two focus groups were thus recruited differently than the previous ten focus groups and were natural groups where participants knew each other beforehand. However, they produced interesting findings as they consisted of people who probably would not have shown an interest in participating in the study outside of school hours. These two focus groups also complemented the sample of previous participants, which helped strengthen the findings of this study. This pertains especially to the high level of education

among Latvians in general, as the educational background of the participants in these groups differed from those in the previous ones.⁶

Finally, most participants were students in secondary or tertiary education or had a university degree (although some did not finish their studies but had taken separate courses or dropped out for various reasons). Different measures were taken to reach out to different parts of the population, such as running advertisements targeting the proper age group on social media or contacting organisations in Latvia that, in different ways, dealt with youth issues. Nevertheless, given the societal context of 2022, young Russian speakers without higher education might not have been familiar with academic research and its purpose or did not see the potential benefits of participation, leading to lower motivation to participate.

With the methodological approach, research design and limitations of this study clarified, the results of the analysis will now be presented. The study's findings are presented in four chapters that connect to the sub-questions: strategic narratives in media material (Chapter 5), news media repertoires as a context for projection and reception (Chapter 6), and different modes of reception (Chapter 7 and 8).

⁶ According to OECD (2022), 46 per cent of 24–34-year-olds in Latvia had a tertiary degree in 2021.

PART II

5 Russian strategic narratives about Latvia

How are Russian strategic narratives about Latvia projected in Sputnik Latvia? This chapter answers the first sub-question by presenting findings from the analysis of Russian foreign policy documents, press briefing statements and media texts from state-controlled Sputnik Latvia. Based on foreign policy objectives relevant to Latvia in Russia's foreign policy concept and bilateral agreements, three strategic narratives projected in press briefings of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Sputnik Latvia are presented. In doing so, Sputnik's close relationship with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the systematic coordination of the narratives are also described.

This chapter contributes to the aim of this thesis in two ways. First, it seeks to describe what makes these narratives strategic. By understanding an actor's intent and objectives, it is possible to identify the intended message and its strategic purpose. Studying statements and policy documents can offer clues about the strategic considerations and motivations behind a narrative and link the narrative to broader policy objectives. Similar to Michelle (2007, p. 209), this study takes the position that it is possible to identify a message within the text while acknowledging a certain level of polysemic undecidability and polyvocality within media texts. Strategic narratives are crafted with specific goals, and the preferred reading is designed to project messages that advance these objectives. They can do so by changing opinions, changing behaviours or contributing to changing the discursive environment in which they operate. By studying the projection of strategic narratives, the groundwork is set for analysing the reception of these narratives when they reach an audience.

Second, this chapter seeks to explain in what ways these narratives aim to persuade a target audience. Studying projection allows us to deconstruct the narrative components and describe elements such as language, framing and emotional appeal that evoke specific reactions. Understanding such techniques helps evaluate why some narratives are compelling and why some fail to resonate with an audience. The narratives are also shaped by cultural context and political climate, often tailored to resonate with a target audience.

The chapter ends with a discussion of the strategic narratives and their projection of different Russian actors.

5.1 Projection of strategic narratives in Russian foreign policy

This first section focuses on Russian foreign policy documents. A strategic narrative is perceived to be a strategy in narrative form, and purposeful narratives are strategic when they are actively and purposefully used to fulfil a goal or objective (Miskimmon et al., 2013). To identify and analyse Russian strategic narratives on Latvia embedded in Russian foreign policy statements and state-controlled media, a definition of strategic narratives as consisting of four components was used: actor, setting, conflict and resolution (Roselle et al., 2014). Actors have agency and are depicted as important to the narrative. Setting refers to how the world and the way it works is depicted. What constitutes the stage? Where is the action taking place? Conflict highlights the importance of temporality. Who does what to whom or what? Regarding resolution, narratives appeal to human beings because they present action to resolve a conflict or disrupt the status quo.

5.1.1 The Russian foreign policy concept

The Russian foreign policy concept is a formal document that is used as a policy instrument and consists of Russia's foreign policy statements. It describes how Russia perceives the world in the form of a set of strategies and actions that the country employs in its interaction with other states and international organisations.

A first reading of the Russian foreign policy concept revealed a number of foreign policy objectives relevant to this study. The foreign policy concept from 2016 was analysed for this study, but the goals mentioned concerning Latvia were also part of the latest foreign policy concept from 2023. Based on the document, each foreign policy objective relevant to Latvia is presented here, and relevant changes are mentioned. Since data in the form of focus groups and individual interviews was collected in 2021–2022, the foreign policy document from 2023 does not apply. However, it is worth mentioning the changes related to the different objectives as they signal how Russia has developed its communication strategy since 2016.

The first foreign policy objective relevant to Russia's strategic narratives pertaining to Latvia was to bolster the standing of Russian media. This policy has received much attention in Latvia as Latvian authorities have banned Russian media outlets, and Russian and Russian-speaking journalists were detained during the studied period (2019–2021). While the 2016 concept sought to “bolster the standing of Russian media and communication tools in the global information space and convey Russia's perspective on international processes to a wider international community” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016), the 2023 concept adds to counteract “the Russophobia campaign led by the unfriendly foreign states and their

associations” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023). This is the first time Russophobia is explicitly mentioned in such a strategic document. In the 2023 policy concept, it is also mentioned that Russia should ensure Russian media is protected from discrimination abroad.

The second relevant foreign policy objective was to counter all manifestations of neo-Nazism, anti-Semitism and aggressive nationalism. This policy objective includes attempts to rewrite history and use it to stir up confrontations and revanchism in global politics. Attempts to revise the outcomes of World War II and promote the depoliticisation of historical discussions are also mentioned. The Russian government accuses Latvia of attempting to rewrite history, for example by mentioning Soviet occupation, which the Russian Federation does not accept. Latvia was further described as glorifying Latvian legionnaires who served with the Waffen SS during World War II. In the 2023 concept, it was added that Russia should take “response measures against foreign states and their associations, foreign officials, organisations and citizens involved in committing unfriendly acts against Russian sites of historical and memorial significance located abroad” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023). Russia here also takes upon itself to disseminate “accurate information abroad about the role and place of Russia in world history”, emphasising the contribution of the Soviet Union to the victory over Nazi Germany.

The third relevant foreign policy objective was to strengthen the Russian language. In a Latvian context this translates to a focus on minority schools, but also to society in general, where Latvian is the only state language. Russian is considered a foreign language, although almost 40 per cent of the population is considered to speak Russian as a first language. In the 2023 concept, it was added that compatriots living abroad are being systematically discriminated against and that Russia, as “the core of the civilizational community of the Russian world”, will provide comprehensive support and protect compatriots, primarily in hostile states, in preserving their all-Russian cultural and linguistic identity.

5.1.2 Bilateral agreements and reports

Besides the foreign policy concept, bilateral reports and Russian reports on Latvia were also included in the analysis to make sure that the analysed press briefings and Sputnik articles were firmly grounded in strategic objectives of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This section lays the foundation for how the previous goals materialise in a Latvian setting. In reports on bilateral agreements, Latvia was described by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as “pursuing a consistent policy of historical revisionism” to blacken the Soviet Union and the actions of the Red Army that liberated Europe by equating the Soviet Union with Nazi Germany. Latvian representatives were described as having promoted the historically false idea that Baltic collaborators were

forced to join Waffen SS by the Nazis. Latvia was also accused of whitewashing and protecting former Waffen-SS Legionnaires and Nazi collaborators, “who are elevated to the rank of participants in the ‘national liberation movement’”. Instead of taking measures to combat neo-Nazism, Latvia was described as making efforts to shift the emphasis and provide Latvian neo-Nazis with a legal basis for their activities (The Russian MFA 2021c).

Furthermore, Latvia was described as pursuing discriminatory policies towards the Russian-speaking minority, “preserving mass statelessness and narrowing the scope of use of the Russian language which is aimed at significant infringement of their rights” (The Russian MFA 2021d). It was also stated that activists “who seek to resist the official line on the Latvianisation of public life and the deterioration of the legal and social status of Russian compatriots” have been under tremendous pressure. The human rights situation in Latvia was described as unfavourable and discriminatory towards national minorities, especially Russian speakers, whom Latvia was still seeing as “a foreign destabilising element” (The Russian MFA 2021d). The remaining Great Patriotic War veterans living in Latvia were described as continuing to face discrimination. Latvia was accused of pursuing a policy of forced de-Russification of all spheres of public life (The Russian MFA 2021c).

5.1.3 Official statements

When studying the press briefings based on foreign policy documents and bilateral agreements, it became clear that Sputnik Latvia closely replicated them. As such, the identified strategic narratives in press briefings and Sputnik articles are presented together rather than separately to avoid repetition and allow for a more holistic analysis. In section 5.3, this symbiotic relationship of how narratives were systematically projected by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Maria Zakharova and Sputnik Latvia is described in more detail.

Before doing so, it is important to note that this study mainly focuses on issue narratives. As stated previously, these cannot be understood in isolation from the system and identity narratives with which they interact and intersect. Three main issue narratives identified in the material are presented, and the strategic narrative components consisting of actor, setting, conflict and resolution are described. For example, settings are closely related to system narratives where the desired world order is described and projected. Actors are closely connected to identity narratives and the role they play in the projected description of the world.

5.2 Projection of strategic narratives in Sputnik Latvia

What was striking about the sampled texts from Sputnik Latvia was their similarity to the official statements of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Similar to previous research on Sputnik (Wagnsson, 2022), the texts were found to be habitually written in a critical tone, often quoting angry or critical officials to strengthen the message. Some articles were almost identical to the official statements and were published on the same dates. Most importantly, they closely followed and cited the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Based on the findings from foreign policy documents, press briefing statements by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Sputnik Latvia articles, three strategic narratives were identified and are described in detail below. The strategic narratives concern freedom of speech, the interpretation of history and the language reform.

5.2.1 Attacking freedom of speech – banning Russian media

The most common strategic narrative during the studied period focused on Latvia's ban on different Russian media outlets. The main actors in this narrative were Latvian authorities, the Russian Embassy in Latvia, the Russian Permanent Mission to the OSCE and the Russian Union of Journalists. Latvia was narrated as an undemocratic state that failed to comply with international regulations on freedom of speech. Latvian authorities were accused of cleansing the information sphere to eliminate undesirable points of view by banning Russian media. They were simultaneously narrated as incompetent fools for not understanding the owner structure of Rossiya Segodnya and RT and portrayed as calculating villains determinedly persecuting Russian journalists as part of a Baltic policy to cleanse the information space from Russian influence (Russian MFA 2020a; Sputnik 2020j). Riga was also assumed to be waging a real attack against everything that was Russian or related to Russia (Russian MFA 2020g; Sputnik 2020k).

Latvia was described as part of “the European Union’s campaign to fight mythical ‘misinformation’ which, in their opinion, emanates from Russia” (Russian MFA 2021a; Sputnik 2020h). Latvia was portrayed as taking advantage of EU sanctions to eliminate Russian media. On the one hand, the EU was accused of allowing this “anti-Russia hysteria” campaign by not having the “required influence on Riga”, thus narrating Latvia as a state that is not living up to its responsibilities as an EU member and a democratic nation. On the other hand, the EU was portrayed as protecting Latvia through its silence (Russian MFA 2020h; Sputnik 2020h). This narrative of applying double standards recurs, and instead of introducing more sanctions against Russia for violating democratic principles, Latvia should not forget about itself and its own gross violations, according to Zakharova (Russian MFA 2021a). Latvian authorities were described as obsessed with and afraid of Russian content (Russian MFA 2020d; Sputnik 2020i) and portrayed as bullying Russia using fabricated news (Russian MFA 2019b; Sputnik 2020j).

The victims in this narrative, besides the Russian media, were also Russian speakers in Latvia, whose access to alternative information was limited

(Russian MFA 2019d; Sputnik 2019a). For example, the closing of the state-controlled TV channel *Perviy Baltiskiy Kanal* (PBK) was understood to have been done ahead of the Riga City Council election to deprive the parties representing the interests of Russian speakers of their primary media platform (Russian MFA 2020a; Sputnik 2020j). The heroes in this narrative, besides Russia, were Russian journalists in Latvia who were standing up for democracy and for access to alternative information. They were also simultaneously narrated as innocent victims persecuted by Latvian security services.

The setting for this narrative on freedom of speech ties into the ‘Russia versus the West’ system narrative (see, for example, Grigor 2020), where the West was stated to have its own perception of pluralism of opinions. From a Russian perspective, the system narrative is one in which Russia strives to restore its image as a superpower, challenging the Western unipolar system and wanting to replace it with a polycentric world order. In this polycentric order, Russia sees the Baltics as its legitimate sphere of interest. In the identity narrative, Russia is excluded and treated badly by the West.

In this setting, Latvia was also described as afraid of everything Russian. As argued in previous research, the rhetoric of Russophobia allows Russia to position itself as a moral victim despised by the West. It also serves as a way to avoid blame and attribute to Latvia the very accusations made against Russia. By referring to the victory over Nazism in World War II and to accusations of Nazism in Latvia, this rhetoric uses references to various layers of memory (Ventsel et al., 2021). Russophobia is not a new phenomenon and has been used by Russian authorities to equate opposition to Russian government policy with opposition to Russian culture (Darczewska & Żochowski, 2015; Feklyunina, 2012). Using such rhetoric, the narrative underlines that Latvia simultaneously hates and is afraid of Russia (Sazonov & Mölder, 2020). The use of Russophobic rhetoric also creates an ‘us versus them’ thinking. Feklyunina (2012) argues that Russophobia implies a radical degree of hostility towards the other, whose actions are presented as constituting an existential threat that requires urgent measures. It also serves as a simple explanation for the ongoing tensions in relations between Russia and the West.

The conflict of this narrative can be described as twofold. On the one hand, it was stated that blocking media channels was an infringement of freedom of speech, which is narrated as the main problem. By accusing Latvia of attacking freedom of speech, Russia challenges Latvia’s legitimacy as a European democratic state. On the other hand, the blocking also hindered Russia from projecting its foreign policy abroad and communicating with target audiences, such as Russian speakers in Latvia. This is more likely the main conflict, although it is not narrated as clearly. The Russian media has had a significant role in Russian foreign policy for many years, where Sputnik and RT have been projecting Russia’s foreign policy to an international audience. Since Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, Latvia has, together with Estonia and Lithuania, been one of the harshest critics of Russian propaganda,

particularly due to their Russian-speaking minorities, which Russia considers to be within its sphere of interest. Using media outlets like RT and Sputnik, Russia also attempts to influence public opinion by aligning with existing local narratives and exploiting existing discontent. For example, they can highlight Latvia's social, political and economic problems by portraying them as hypocritical and unstable.

The suggested resolution is to allow Russian media to operate in Latvia according to democratic principles of freedom of speech. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs threatens to inform international structures and use countermeasures, making the narrative inconsistent. The desired solution is to pressure Latvia to allow Russian media and journalists to broadcast and work in Latvia.

Emotions and affect are strategically used in the projection of this narrative. Verbs like attacking, cleansing, persecuting and eliminating are emotionally loaded terms. They are used to narrate Latvia in a bad light and to induce a sense of fear in a Russian-speaking audience. The rhetoric of aggression may cause mental images that evoke a sense of threat or danger (Ahmed, 2004b) in the sense that a Russian cultural identity is threatened by Latvian authorities. President Putin has even equated Russophobia with anti-Semitism, describing hatred of Russians as the new hatred of Jews (McGlynn, 2023, p. 107). Russophobia is thus used as an accusatory narrative that relies on rallying emotion rather than appealing to logic. At the same time, the threat is also addressed towards the other, namely Latvians, as Russia threatens Latvia with countermeasures if it does not allow Russian media to operate.

5.2.2 Reinterpreting history – glorifying Nazism

The second most prevalent strategic narrative pertained to the interpretation of history. The main actors in this narrative were the Latvian parliament (particularly deputies of the National Alliance), the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation. Latvia was accused of attempting to rewrite history and revise the outcomes of World War II and, in doing so, glorifying Nazism. Latvia was described as a calculating villain (on several occasions accused of Nazism, similar to Ukraine), where the vandalisation of monuments was described as “a long-term and well-directed policy course of Riga and Tallinn towards the falsification of history and the struggle against the so-called Soviet occupation legacy” (Russian MFA 2019b; Sputnik 2019b). The heroes in this narrative were the soldiers who saved Latvia from forced Nazi enslavement during World War II, where Latvia was perceived as a villain due to its collaboration with Nazi Germany. Particularly the politicians from the national-conservative party, the National Alliance, were seen as radical nationalists and villains.

In this strategic narrative, the Russian government adopts the role of a watchdog, stating that Latvian authorities “will not be able to hide these

revanchist incidents from the global community. People in Latvia see what is happening and condemn it. We will monitor Latvia's compliance with its obligations" (Russian MFA 2021b; Sputnik 2021a).

The setting for this narrative of revising history is part of a system narrative in which Russia liberated Eastern Europe from Nazi occupation during World War II, or the Great Patriotic War as it is called in Russia. The victory over Nazi Germany is a central part of Russia's identity narrative, which uses historical memory as a unifying force. The war created a sense of pride, unity and shared identity among Russian speakers. The setting is one in which this narrative is used to further position Russia as a global power and assert moral authority in international affairs. War monuments and commemorative events like Victory Day on 9 May play a key role in keeping the memory of the war alive. By reacting to the removal of monuments or the prohibition of wearing symbols associated with the war and, more importantly, victory, Russia frames these events as Western attempts to undermine and disrespect the Soviet Union's role in defeating fascism.

The conflict was constituted by Latvia's decision to ban the wearing of Soviet military uniforms and the St George ribbon at public events, thus making them equivalent to a Nazi uniform. The decision caused outrage at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Zakharova described the timing of the decision as the Latvian parliament being so "anxious to time their malicious initiatives to coincide with the 75th anniversary of the Victory in the Great Patriotic War over the brown plague" (Russian MFA 2020b; Sputnik 2020b). From a Russian perspective, the events were seen as insulting the memory of the people who liberated Europe and Latvia from Nazi enslavement. Connected to this problem were also vandalisations of Soviet monuments (Russian MFA 2019c; Sputnik 2020l).

Related to the interpretation of World War II, there was also disagreement regarding the Soviet occupation of Latvia, which, from a Russian point of view, is seen as a political project aimed at advancing all manner of claims against the Russian Federation and falsifying that period of history. In July 2020, Russia emphasised the 80th anniversary of incorporating Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia into the Soviet Union. From Russia's perspective, the two nations were not at war, and the deployment of Russian troops in Latvia was a mutual agreement (Russian MFA 2020e; Sputnik 2020m). One month later, in August 2020, the 100th anniversary of the Riga Peace Treaty was celebrated in Latvia, which by Russia was seen as a one-sided interpretation of the last century's historical events to whip up the anti-Russia hysteria. During a press briefing on the 100th anniversary of the Riga Peace Treaty of 1920, Latvia was told to abandon its historical grievances and look for common ground (Russian MFA 2020f; Sputnik 2020n).

The suggested resolution is for Latvia to abandon its view and accept Russia's interpretation as the only correct version of historical events. In doing so,

Latvia should allow the celebration of Victory Day, including its main symbols and Soviet monuments, as they are part of Soviet history.

By mentioning anti-Russia hysteria in both narratives, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs implies that Latvian authorities are irrational, emotional and ridiculous. Besides belittling the opponent, it makes them question their perception of reality and works as a form of gaslighting. Calling someone hysterical is also a way of showing they do not take them seriously. Although this narrative is filled with affect, it is not using words as emotional as in the previous example of banning Russian media. Instead, it consists of terms with strong connotations regarding historical identity.

Latvia's glorification of Nazism and rejection of Russian liberation are strategically used to appeal to the Russian-speaking minority. If the previous narrative caused feelings of fear, this narrative seeks to create feelings of pride in collectively being part of liberating Europe from fascism. At the same time, it also creates a sense of victimhood in which Latvia unfairly attacks Russia, which creates a shared emotional experience that strengthens unity within the group. By accusing Latvian authorities of falsifying history, the narratives evoke anger against the authorities as they are perceived as disrespecting or challenging Russia's narrative. Based on affect theory, the Russian-speaking identity can be described as a collective body (Ahmed, 2004b) attacked by the Latvian state.

5.2.3 The language reform – forced assimilation

The third most prominent narrative pertained to Latvia's efforts to remove the Russian language from the education system, referred to as Latvia's "language terrorism policy" (Sputnik 2019c). The main actors in this narrative were the Latvian authorities responsible for the education system in Latvia. The victims were Russian speakers in Latvia who were discriminated against by Latvian authorities in different ways, such as by being taken away the right to education in one's native language.

The setting is one in which Russia uses the Russian language to unite Russian speakers under the common concept of *Russkiy Mir*. The Russian language is promoted to unify diverse ethnic groups in the Russian Federation and to maintain cultural and political ties with Russian-speaking communities outside its borders. By promoting the Russian language, Russia enhances its influence and helps to foster favourable views of Russia and its policies and interests. Russian language education also offers counter-narratives to those projected by Western institutions, which help counter Western influences in regions such as the Baltics.

The conflict was described as the de-Russification of the entire Latvian education system, where the final objective was the forced assimilation of its Russian-speaking population. In this narrative, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasised the negative consequences of such a reform, stating

that it could have a negative psychological impact on Russian-speaking children who can no longer receive education in their native language. Moreover, in the future, it would lead to inequality in the labour market and lower living standards for ethnic minorities (Russian MFA 2020c; Sputnik 2019d). By doing so, Latvia again fails to comply with international regulations on ethnic minorities' linguistic rights (Russian MFA 2019a; Sputnik 2019a). The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was particularly annoyed with the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe for demonstrating a biased attitude in supporting Latvia's forcible de-Russification of the country and the violation of the language and education rights of the local Russian-speaking community. "One is particularly perplexed by the attempt to justify discrimination against the Russian language regarding its status as compared to other minority languages, namely those spoken in the EU" (Russian MFA 2020i).

The suggested resolution is again to adhere to Russia's demands and allow Latvia's Russian-speaking children to receive education in their native language. This narrative ties into the narrative of banning Russian media and denying the Latvian Russian-speaking minority access to information in their native language. As with the strategic narrative on attacking freedom of speech, the Russian government repeatedly mentions international organisations such as the EU, which are seen as regulators that Russia turns towards for justice but also as villains part of an anti-Russian campaign, especially when not adhering to Russia's demands.

By calling the Latvian language policy terroristic, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs seeks to present the language issue as threatening the Russian-speaking identity and use it to create fear among the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia and elsewhere. Terror in itself is an emotionally loaded term signalling that Latvian authorities not only seek to insert fear in Russian speakers but that organisations (such as Russian language minority schools) also will be forced to take measures and that social structures will change and negatively affect Russian speakers in Latvia.

Similar to the previous narrative on the glorification of Nazism and falsification of history, this narrative uses terms like "de-Russification" and "forced assimilation", which have strong connotations for Russian-speaking audiences. The forced adoption of a language or culture creates a sense of loss of one's original identity and may create feelings of grief or mourning over the loss of language and cultural practices (Ahmed, 2004b). It may also create fear regarding one's ability to preserve one's identity for future generations. Furthermore, fear of the erasure of one's cultural identity drives a defensive affective response. As a result, members of the group may resist the assimilation process despite external pressure. Forced assimilation also leads to resentment towards the dominant group or state that imposes it. The emotional language used further moves audiences to become active, for example by protesting in the street against the education reform.

5.3 Sputnik Latvia's role in narrative persuasion

This section briefly describes how the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Sputnik Latvia projected these strategic narratives. When comparing the press briefing statements to how they were reported in texts by Sputnik Latvia, it was noticeable that Sputnik Latvia regularly published articles with extensive excerpts from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' press briefing statements. This phenomenon occurred with almost each press briefing during the research period, where each statement was followed by a Sputnik Latvia text citing the Foreign Ministry. As a rule, one text where the Russian Embassy in Latvia commented on the situation was published, which closely followed the narrative of the Ministry but used a harsher tone. For example, when commenting on the vandalism of a Soviet monument in Jēkabpils, the Russian Embassy went as far as calling the vandalism "neo-Nazi revanchism". At the same time, the Russian Embassy also noted that the vandalism took place the night before 23 February (when Russia celebrates Defender of the Fatherland Day), again paying attention to the timing of events (Sputnik, 2021a). In another article, the Embassy called Latvia's interpretation of history "perverted" (Sputnik 2021a).

The texts citing the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Russian Embassy in Latvia were usually accompanied by a text that cited pro-Russian politicians in Latvia. One example is Miroslav Mitrofanov, co-chairman of the pro-Russian political party Latvian Russian Union (LRU), whose ideas closely align with Russia's perspective. According to Mitrofanov, Russian television was banned primarily to eliminate competitors in the media ecology (Sputnik, 2020a). The ban on RT was symbolic and served as a tool for maintaining a negative attitude towards Russia, which the West was beginning to forget about due to the pandemic (Sputnik, 2020d).

Latvia's agency was ridiculed by citing Ruslans Pankratovs, leader of the Eurosceptic Latvian Action Party (Rīcības partija), who jokingly called Latvia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs part of the US State Department (Sputnik, 2020e), explaining that Latvian foreign policy follows the United States so closely that it is part of their state apparatus. Latvian authorities' decision to ban RT was also ridiculed by Mikhail Smolin, deputy editor-in-chief of Tsargrad TV, who called it a mixture of Russophobia and stupidity.

Following the idea of double standards, Dmitry Kiselev, head of Rossiya Segodnya, stated in an interview that Latvian authorities should stop persecuting freelance journalists who did nothing wrong: "We in Russia find all this wild. Nothing like this is practised here. Everyone here writes what they want" (Sputnik, 2020f). Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of RT, also commented on the ban, stating that it would have little effect: "In Latvia our Sputnik was blocked from all sides a long time ago, which does not prevent it from being a fairly effective resource there" (Sputnik, 2020c).

As a rule, pro-Russian actors in Latvia were complemented by voices in Russia, such as those of the persons mentioned above, but also by Russian organisations, such as the Union of Journalists of Russia. Its chairman, Vladimir Solovyov, commented on the detention of Russian-speaking journalist in Latvia: “This, of course, is absolutely unacceptable ... In fact, illegal actions are taking place. Once again, one of the Baltic countries is openly violating the freedom of the press and the freedom to disseminate information” (Sputnik, 2020g).

What does this mean for the projection of Russian strategic narratives? The close relationship between Sputnik Latvia and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is important for two reasons.

First, Sputnik Latvia serves as a megaphone that projects Russian strategic narratives and increases their spread to a wider audience in the hybrid media ecology. The articles shared on social media are also picked up by other local Russian media outlets such as *bb.lv*. The narratives may also be picked up by local Latvian news media as they also reproduce affective narratives. They do so by sharing tweets that become headlines – often without fact-checking – and are often used as clickbait, as they generate upset feelings and curiosity among readers. As Papacharissi (2019, p. 2) states, “We hear one liners filled with alarming intensity, but never receive more substance”. These one-liners are then repeated over and over again to lull people into agreement or indignation to the point where they produce affective reactions of their own. This use of affect can be very successful in sustaining feelings of community.

Second, Sputnik Latvia strengthens the importance of the narrative for the target audience by including local politicians and actors. This strategy was probably used to increase the chances of reposting by other local media outlets and thus increase the outreach, as local actors share the texts. By involving local actors, they also strengthen the message as the audience perceives them as more trustworthy and, as a result, becomes more receptive to the message projected by the strategic narrative.

5.4 Discussion

What makes these narratives strategic, then, and in what ways do they work to persuade a target audience? All three narratives have similarities and some differences. This chapter has identified three prominent strategic narratives about Latvia, formulated in Russian foreign policy statements and projected by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Sputnik Latvia between 2019 and 2021. These include attacking freedom of speech by banning Russian media, reinterpreting history by glorifying Nazism, and forcing assimilation by eliminating Russian language education. These three narratives were reinforced by Sputnik Latvia, which closely followed the timing and statements made by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

When it comes to the narrative components, actors are central to the structure of narratives and are characterised not only by their self-presentation but also by how others understand them. Actors frame their character and that of others by selecting and highlighting some parts of their history or actions to promote a particular interpretation of their character (Roselle et al., 2014). In these three strategic narratives, Latvia as an actor was narrated as an unfriendly and Russophobic state inferior to Russia. Latvian authorities were simultaneously narrated as both evil and calculating, yet at the same time foolish and incompetent. Russia and Russian speakers in Latvia, on the other hand, were simultaneously narrated as victims and heroes. By calling Latvian authorities hysterical and Russophobic terrorists, Russia was actively using aggressive rhetoric to make Latvia look bad and undermine its reputation as a democratic member of the European Union. Russophobia and fascism were also used to describe the actors, which both are sensitive terms saturated with affect. As such, they aim to persuade by activating several layers of memory, increasing the chances of Russian speakers identifying emotionally with the Russian strategic narratives and thus increasing the chances of narrative persuasion.

As with actors, the setting is packed with assumptions, assertions and underlying principles. It serves as a foundation that contextualises both the conflict and the actors involved. The setting is crucial for how we interpret a narrative as it influences whether the actions of the main actors are perceived as justified or aggressive (Roselle et al., 2014). Common to all three narratives was a setting where large parts of the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia had grown up with a Russian perspective of historical events. This makes them more receptive to Russian influence as exploiting existing problems in Latvian society may resonate with many Russian speakers' perceptions of the world.

The conflicts in these three narratives are described in black-and-white terms and present simple solutions to complex problems. Doing so can be seen as part of the narrative strategy, as human beings seek to understand the world by reducing uncertainty and seeking efficiency. As will be shown in the following chapters, this is a strategy well suited for an online and fragmented news media ecology. Presenting the conflict dramatically and intensively increases the chances that it will be picked up by journalists, as the attention economy drives the news (Papacharissi, 2019). By repeating the problem over and over, if a word again and again is used in a certain way, then that use becomes intrinsic; it becomes a form of signing (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 96).

The findings show similarities with previous studies on Russian strategic narratives embedded in English versions of Sputnik and how they narrate Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland and The Netherlands (Wagnsson & Barzanje, 2019; Deverell et al., 2020). For example, there are similarities in how Latvia is narrated to a Russian-speaking audience, such as the focus on negative narration, suggesting that the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs applies similar strategic narratives for Russian-speaking and English-speaking

audiences and is relatively consistent in its strategy. There are, however, important differences. For example, Russia itself was narrated differently in the strategic narratives about Latvia. Compared to previous studies, while Russia was narrated as a victim of Western Russophobia in which Latvia was taking an active part with Estonia and Lithuania, Russia was also narrated as superior to Latvia by stressing that the Russian interpretation of history was the only correct version and telling Latvia to let go of historical grievances and instead look for common ground in the bilateral relationship with Russia.

The findings correspond with Grigor's (2020) idea of Russia perceiving itself as a big brother of all Slavic nations and, in this case, as knowing better than its Baltic neighbour and acting in a better way. These examples also illustrate that Russia narrates itself as a responsible actor by raising concerns about freedom of speech and the rights of minorities, similar to Claessen's (2021, p. 2) findings on Russia's narration of Ukraine as a 'brother nation' shifting into a 'threatening other'.

The narratives discussed here are issue narratives and focus on why a certain policy is needed and desirable. They differ from system and identity narratives by focusing on a specific conflict, framing it to signal urgency and importance to a specific audience. Focusing on issue narratives allows for more specificity and clarity and helps pinpoint inconsistencies or alignment between what Russia says about the world, how it narrates itself and what it does. They are closely connected, however, and contradictions between different levels can undermine the effectiveness of policy-related strategic narratives. As will be shown in the following chapters, an example of inconsistency could be the narrative on freedom of speech in which Russia, as an actor, also bans foreign media and labels independent journalists as foreign agents, creating a mismatch between what they say and what they do.

Issue narratives are typically short-term. Although they go back for decades in some cases, they focus on present events and frame them to fit their understanding of a problem. Issue narratives are, therefore, strategic in the sense that they seek to shape the terrain on which policy discussions take place (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 7). Because actors interpret an issue in terms of different narratives, it may be difficult to agree on what they are disagreeing about in the first place. An example can be the issue of historical events and how they should be interpreted. It is difficult to overcome this disjuncture through a truth-seeking discourse because the positions are often based on affective associations.

Based on an approach that on the spectrum of persuasion is placed on the thick reflexive end, as suggested by Miskimmon et al. (2013), the role of communication in this context is to target contradictions and anxieties in the identities and self-images of others. The role of persuasion then becomes getting others to change their behaviour by publicising their faults. This approach could explain why the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs uses rhetoric that aims to smear Latvia in its narration and actively exploits existing grievances

among a Russian-speaking minority population in Latvia to move public opinion or gain media attention.

Ahmed (2005) notes that negative emotions or bad feelings are collectively generated, circulated and attached to particular groups or individuals. Rather than just being personal experiences, they are political in nature as some actors use them to create social division, maintain power dynamics or legitimise certain political decisions. The narration exploits how Russian speakers may experience resentment and alienation due to state policies and societal attitudes perceived as discriminatory and exclusionary. Russian speakers in Latvia may also feel excluded from the national Latvian narrative in which language and loyalty are intertwined.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine further complicated feelings of alienation and shame among Russian speakers in Latvia, who share the language of an aggressor and war criminal. By amplifying bad feelings, the Russian narratives effectively maintain a division within Latvian society and prevent the consolidation of a cohesive national identity that includes Russian speakers. The politics of bad feelings is not only about feeling bad but also about who is attributed as the object and the subject of that feeling in the moment of its declaration (Ahmed, 2005). For example, the cause of bad feelings regarding the use of the Latvian language as the sole official language in education is attributed to Latvian authorities. How we feel about others also aligns us as a collective (Ahmed, 2004a).

Finally, one object of narrative struggle is the understanding actors hold of the international system, its history, how it works and how it will develop. From a reflexive point of view, focus is put on shared experiences, crises and feelings of threat or hope that are part of these conditions (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 109). These understandings work upon existing narratives that may be deeply held, and the narrative is subject to contestation and possibly contradictions by events. Russia often emphasises the shared historical and cultural ties between Latvia and Russia, focusing on the Soviet time as a period of prosperity and economic development (Bērziņa et al., 2023). This strategy can be found particularly in the eastern part of Latvia, where the Latgale region was economically worse off following Latvia's independence. Through this strategy, Russia also aims to create a sense of nostalgia among, for example, the Russian-speaking minority, especially those who may feel disconnected from Latvia's current European orientation.

Narrating the Russian-speaking minority as being marginalised or discriminated against by the Latvian state leverages a sense of victimhood. This narration could create solidarity and sympathy among Russian speakers in Latvia, where Russia positions itself as the protector of Russian speakers and emphasises their emotional connection. Also, by smearing Latvia, the strategic narratives try to undermine NATO and the EU and portray them as a threat to Latvia's sovereignty and economic well-being (Kudors, 2023), for example,

by using current events to leverage economic issues or social conflicts to argue that Latvia's Western alignment has led to more challenges than benefits.

Concluding remarks

This chapter has presented three strategic narratives about Latvia which are firmly anchored in Russia's foreign policy objectives and voiced by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs during press briefings when discussing Latvia. The strategic narratives concerned history, freedom of speech and language, and they were projected by Sputnik Latvia between 2019 and 2021 through consistent and systematic reporting. The strategic narratives aim to persuade by targeting contradictions and anxieties in Latvia's identity and self-image. They aim to sow division by exploiting existing grievances among Latvia's Russian-speaking minority and by using terms filled with affect, such as Russophobia and fascism, but also nostalgic feelings for the Soviet Union. The media ecology in which these narratives are projected and received by young Russian speakers in Latvia will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 6.

6 News media repertoires and the reception of strategic narratives

The previous chapter explored how Russian strategic narratives were projected in Sputnik Latvia. This chapter focuses on the media ecology in which these narratives are projected and received. Based on focus groups and individual follow-up interviews conducted between 2021 and 2022, this chapter explores how young Russian speakers perceive news media in general and how they decide what news to consume. The chapter contributes to the aim of this thesis in two ways.

First, by focusing on participants' perceptions of news media outlets, it is possible to understand how they engage with news in a broader media ecology. What criteria do they have for trusting a source, and what strategies do they use to assess conflicting information?

Second, mapping participants' news media repertoires based on their media use makes it possible to assess participants' ability to evaluate media content critically. Participants' news media repertoires also affect not only the type of narratives they are regularly exposed to but also the context and their engagement with such narratives.

The chapter follows a thematic structure. First, participants' perception of news media and their selection criteria for including media in their repertoire is explored. Second, participants' news preferences are categorised into four news media repertoires. Then, it is shown how Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 influenced participants' news consumption. The chapter ends with a discussion of the participants' news media repertoires.

6.1 General perceptions of news media

To study the projection and reception of Russian strategic narratives, it is important to study the media ecology in which these narratives are projected and the news media repertoires through which these young Russian speakers filter these narratives. In a high-choice online environment where speed and attention to different extents affect all news media outlets regardless of audience, it is necessary to study how participants perceive news media in general and map participants' varying news media use. First, the projection and reception of strategic narratives do not occur in a vacuum and can only be understood

by accounting for the media ecologies in which they circulate and have effect. It is crucial to explore how participants navigate the media ecology and decide what to read and believe and why they do so. Second, participants' news media repertoires influence the type of narratives to which they are regularly exposed. Participants' different media repertoires might also influence their interpretation of news events.

As mentioned in the chapter on context, there are currently two separate media ecologies in Latvia, one Latvian and one Russian. For a younger generation of Russian speakers, there are also domestic and international Russian media outlets that target a Russian-speaking audience abroad, such as BBC News in Russian and Deutsche Welle in Russian. This section will first describe how participants perceive news media in general and their selection criteria and strategies for choosing news outlets. The sections that follow will map their news media repertoires and explore their navigation in a polarised media ecology as well as their perception of Russian state-controlled media.

6.1.1 Critique of all news media outlets

Most participants expressed that they were critical of all media outlets, regardless of type and origin, and therefore tried to constantly compare different news sources. This strategy was used because one could never fully trust a media outlet. To some extent, all media depend on sponsors, the state, and the policy and opinions of the owner. Since no media was considered fully independent, one could not rely on the same news source. Some participants even described free and independent media as an illusion:

(Vadim, 29, Riga) I think it's all propaganda. Well, that's not what I think; I'm sure it's one hundred per cent true. Because free media is fiction, because any media outlet has an information policy [and] they have sponsors, even if it's not some kind of political campaigning. It can be the incentive of some company so that someone would go and buy some products. In other words, there's no such thing as free media.

(Vera, 27, Daugavpils) After I got into journalism school, I learned that one of the key points is the issue of funding, which finances the activities of these media channels. And thus, it became clear that we were to finance it at the expense of certain politicians and organisations. The media are inclined to lie and present information in a certain way.

Both Vadim and Vera had studied journalism as part of their education. They considered that news media never could be fully independent because they are always dependent on sponsors to some extent, and this dependence influences the reporting. It was common among participants to consider Latvian media to be political and report in favour of a certain politician or a certain political party, especially in the case of the local media in Daugavpils. Other

participants mentioned the issue of who finances the news media outlet. For example, Aleksandr did not trust state-funded media:

(Aleksandr, 28, Riga) I don't trust those media [outlets] that are funded by the government of the Russian Federation. They have a direct interest in distorting the information they provide in some way. I don't like it, so I usually don't turn to such media.

While Aleksandr was not interested in Russian state-controlled media because of their inclination to distort information, the distrust towards state-funded media among the participants can be seen as part of a broader scepticism towards traditional news media outlets. The lack of independence young Russian speakers perceived can be connected to Russia's control over the media and a Soviet legacy in which journalists in the Latvian media system can be perceived as less willing to challenge the government (Rožukalne, 2020). While part of a larger global trend, young people in Latvia tend to have lower trust in state institutions. Particularly in this historical and political context, participants may be aware of the risks of government propaganda and manipulation. Being critical of the media is not unique to Russian-speaking youth. Previous research shows that Latvian and Russian speakers are sceptical towards the media (Juzefovičs, 2022) and distrust political leadership (Jōesaar et al., 2022). How do participants cope in this situation? The next sections will describe how participants assess different news media outlets and how they compare their news reporting.

6.1.2 Criteria for assessing news reporting

Since participants reasoned that no media outlet was fully independent, they considered it necessary to read several different sources and get different perspectives. When asked how they decided what news media to watch or read and what news sources they considered reliable, many participants expressed that the storytelling of a media outlet was an important factor:

(Antonina, 26, Daugavpils) Storytelling is important to me. Propaganda at the moment unfortunately is quite relevant, and as soon as you notice some moments when there's a radical sentiment or a very emotional text ... I most likely read an article where the facts are stated without an emotional colouring of this fact. As soon as a deviation in one direction or the other begins, then I understand that, most likely, this media isn't for me.

(Konstantin, 21, Liepāja) If it's information from some media outlet that I don't know, then for me, a very important factor is whether there's a bright emotional colouring in the presentation of the material. Most often, if the information is presented emotionally, it's manipulation and untrue.

How the information was presented was important for whether they and other participants would consider a news media outlet credible and trustworthy. Many participants also described how they had experienced increased propaganda recently and expressed frustration regarding news reporting in general. Being part of a polarised media ecology, Antonina and Konstantin described how they considered sensational and emotional reporting to be manipulative and propagandistic. Participants also expressed that they expected journalists to the greatest extent possible to be objective and to the point in their reporting and leave out subjective opinions:

(Svetlana, 25, Riga) It should be brief because usually I don't have much time to sit and read an article. Brief, clear and to the point without such a big personal opinion. Because there are usually very different opinions, and I don't like when journalists write a lot there. I want to read in the article that someone has done something. I don't want to read what you think he did and why.

Svetlana expected news texts to be short and concise without any particular colouring by the journalist. Participants often described biased reporting as a common phenomenon in both Latvian and Russian media, and they demonstrated minimal interest in the journalist's opinion, expressing a preference for factual information regarding the events in question. Selective coverage of a political topic can give the impression that the journalist is shaping the news to fit a certain agenda rather than offering a balanced or impartial analysis of facts.

Many participants reacted negatively to what they perceived to be emotional news texts. The choice of words matters greatly for whether a news media outlet is considered trustworthy. Many participants expressed dissatisfaction with an overall deterioration of journalistic content, where articles were becoming more one-sided, the journalist's opinion was given and the content primarily was tailored to get clicks and subscribers. Often, this was done by playing on people's emotions and curiosity:

(Mikhail, 25, Riga) I can watch something from Delfi. More often than not, I try not to because ... I have often come across the fact that the information they convey is heavily distorted (...). If I see Delfi, I don't even open it. (...) If you open it, you start reading, and you read up to a paragraph and a half and realise that there are a whole bunch of grammatical errors, and you understand that it's already doubtful to finish reading.

(Moderator) And how did Delfi deserve your dislike?

(Mikhail, 25, Riga) There was one article that I thought was very unprofessional from a journalistic point of view, and after that there's no point in getting information from this information source anymore.

(...)

(Emiliya, 24, Riga) For me, it's very important that they did not suck the news out of thin air. For example, they took one phrase and turned it upside down.

At the same time, let's say it will be indicated somewhere in the text, but the title is such that everyone runs to look at it as quickly as possible, but in fact there's nothing wrong or it's absolutely untrue. Well, as Mikhail mentioned, everything's distorted to such an extent that ... I don't even know ...

(Nadezhda, 24, Riga) Well, I agree about Delfi, they write a lot of nonsense often.

Mikhail, Emiliya and Nadezhda discussed a topic that was common in the focus groups. The use of clickbait and taking information out of context was something that many participants had experienced. As in the example of Mikhail, who stopped reading Delfi after its controversial reporting on a topic, Emiliya in the follow-up interview shared a similar incident that had affected her confidence in Latvian news media outlets. Delfi, in particular, was described as a fast medium that posted new articles every other minute, resulting in sloppy language or incorrect reporting. This way of reporting also contributed to scepticism towards Latvian news media and created an urge to be critical of all media.

In the next section, a common strategy for how to deal with this situation of not being able to fully trust news media outlets will be described, which was to consume news from a variety of sources and in both Latvian and Russian, leading to exposure to a variety of different narratives.

6.1.3 Comparing news in both languages

Besides using different news sources, several participants said they also read both Latvian and Russian versions of local news portals, particularly the local news portal Delfi, which has a Latvian and a Russian edition. The editorial content differed depending on language, even for the same events. Most participants still consumed most of the news in Russian, however, even if they spoke Latvian fluently. Some participants also read Latvian news but did so more as a complement. The idea that events are reported in different ways depending on language was common, but there were also comments that they targeted different audiences:

(Pyotr, 24, Daugavpils) Some news published in [the] Latvian [version] are a separate topic from the Russian version of Delfi. In my opinion, more news are published with a negative connotation about our country [in the Russian version].

(Interviewer) Comparing the Latvian and the Russian versions?

(Pyotr, 24, Daugavpils) Well, this is purely my subjective opinion. They [the Russian version] can post more negatively about the ruling party than the Latvian-language portal. (...) The Latvian-language media [outlets] have their audience, and the Russian-speaking audience wants to hear something else. So, most likely, this is why the Russian-language media publish news of a different orientation.

(Viktoriya, 26, Riga) The Russian language version of the site [Delfi] is more focused on the Russian-speaking audience. (...) It seems to me that the Latvian version of Delfi is more neutral. If you read some news in Latvian, they are more detached. They present information and do not include their point of view.

The two examples provided by Pyotr and Viktoriya show how participants experienced the reporting differently depending on whether they read the Latvian or the Russian version of Delfi. While the Latvian version was described as more neutral and objective, the Russian version was described as more emotional and critical of Latvian political parties than its Latvian language version.

By reading and comparing the reporting of events in both versions, participants adopted a self-image of critical, reflective media users able to put the puzzle together from ideologically diverse and conflicting pieces of information, as reported by previous studies (Juzefovičs & Vihalemm, 2020; Vihalemm & Juzefovičs, 2022). Doing so, they kept themselves informed and strived to discover the truth in between (Rožukalne et al., 2022). However, most participants preferred to access news in Russian and looked for news in other languages if they looked for functions not fulfilled by Russian language media. These are not new phenomena but can be found in previous research (Hasebrink, 2012).

Young Russian speakers are not a homogeneous group. It is important to describe the different ways they access information and the sources they include in their repertoires in more detail. In the next section, four news media repertoires will be presented that have been mapped based on the participants' news media use.

6.2 Categorisation of news media repertoires

Having described the participants' perception of news media in general and their criteria for selection in particular, to study the projection and reception of strategic narratives it is important to map what type of news media participants consume and how often. When asked how they found out about current events in Latvia and the rest of the world, most participants said they got their news through social media, either via subscriptions they had or via the news shared by friends and relatives in their news feeds.

Facebook and Instagram were the most popular social networking sites, but participants also used TikTok and the Russian social media platforms Telegram and VKontakte. Facebook has become so widely used as a hub for news that it could be dubbed "legacy social media" (Peters et al., 2022), and Latvia's Russian-speaking youth are no exception. X (formerly Twitter) was also named as a site where participants would access recent news events before

traditional media outlets mentioned it. Overall, these findings resonate with previous studies where younger audiences spend the most time on the internet and access news from a number of different sources online (Cotter & Thorson, 2022; Edgerly et al., 2018; Geers, 2020; Peters et al., 2022; Swart, 2023). It was not common to watch television. Some participants mentioned that they owned a TV but seldom watched it. Others stated that they only watched television when visiting parents and older relatives.

(Aleksandr, 28, Riga) I haven't had a TV for a long time. Because, in my opinion, they don't show anything interesting there. Nothing that you can't watch on the internet.

(Anastasia, 29, Riga) I haven't watched TV in probably 11 years. Only when I visit my grandmother I see what they show there, I'm horrified. Most of my information comes from news portals.

Television, in general, was strongly associated with Russian state-controlled media and an older generation. Some participants listened to the radio, but did so mostly while driving or at work. Only a few participants reported reading physical newspapers. To varying extent, all participants received their news online and through social networks on their phones.

Based on the focus groups and individual follow-up interviews, it was found that participants' news consumption could be categorised into four groups of news media repertoires: algorithmic users, selective users, heavy users and news avoiders. These will be presented in more detail in the following sections.

6.2.1 Algorithmic users

The most common group can be described as algorithmic users. Such participants were interested in news but came across them casually by scrolling their social media feeds. These participants did not actively subscribe to media outlets but came across news that was shared by friends and family online. This did not mean that they were not interested in news or did not look for news actively, but rather that they consumed news on a more casual basis and, to a greater extent, based on algorithms.

(Emiliya, 24, Riga) I get the news mainly from Facebook, what appears there. (...) Much information I now get from TikTok [laughs]. I never thought that this would happen. I went there for the music, and now, somehow, I follow interesting comrades who are broadcasting from Ukraine and Russia.

(Leonid, 30, Daugavpils) [I get the news from] YouTube channels. Basically, it's from Russian liberals. (...) Facebook also brings up many sources in half a minute. (...) For the most part, Russian media outlets are broadcast through fragments in these [Russian] blogs. The last one I watched was Maxim Katz.

There you have, for example, I don't know, Solovyov. There's the darkest stuff [laughs].

Both Emiliya and Leonid got their news from social media. They did not actively subscribe to different outlets but looked at what appeared on TikTok and Facebook. Through their media use, they also indirectly consumed Russian state-controlled media through Russian YouTubers. Common for this group was a high level of indirect consumption of content from Russia. Some participants also looked for news recommendations by opening search engines such as Yandex and Google on their phones. For example, Nika in Daugavpils explained:

(Nika, 19, Daugavpils) [I get the information from] Social networks mainly from a feed somewhere on Instagram or something else. (...) I have a Google app on my phone, and I immediately have relevant news. There's no need to search purposefully for some news. I find that all these news find you.

Nika used Google as a news source. She was also an active user of Telegram. Participants in this group were, like Nika, highly dependent on algorithms, and several participants mentioned that they would look at trending videos on YouTube. This group of participants also tended to be more interested in entertainment content. For example, the high school students in Liepāja mentioned a Russian online publication, The whole truth of the show (*Vsya pravda show*), which publishes news about celebrities and fashion on VKontakte, Telegram and Instagram. Many participants could be said to belong to this group, and their inclinations towards Russian YouTubers will also be described in more detail later in this chapter.

6.2.2 Heavy users

The second largest group can be described as heavy users, meaning that they subscribe to and consume a lot of news from a variety of different sources. The most common news portals among participants were Delfi, TVNet and Mixnews, which all have editions in Latvian and Russian. Local news portals were common among heavy users in Daugavpils and Liepāja. Daugavpils has two main news outlets in Russian, Gorod.lv and Grani.lv. Participants described Gorod.lv or *Nash Gorod* (our city) as supporting the city mayor. Grani.lv, on the other hand, was described as oppositional. Both news portals publish in the Russian language. In Liepāja, participants turned to liepajniekiem.lv and irliepaja.lv, both Latvian-only news portals. Local news portals were used to find out what was happening in the city and as a complement to Delfi and other national news portals.

Typical for this group was their wide range of different sources and their focus on consuming Latvian language news media. One heavy user was

Konstantin in Liepāja. In both the focus group and the follow-up interview he described that he was a person who constantly reflected upon trying to step outside his ‘Russian information bubble’:

(Konstantin, 21, Liepāja) I use a lot of different sources of information. There’s social networks like Twitter and Facebook. (...) I also read international media, BBC English-language and Russian-language versions, there’s Deutsche Welle, Latvian media, Latvian and Russian-speaking. I’m one of the few people under 40 who also read newspapers. I really like our local newspaper, *Kurzemes vards*, because I’m interested in what’s happening in our city, in Liepāja. (...) I read different media [outlets] for different target audiences to get a more complete picture. I often find it [is] as if I live in my bubble despite trying to get information from different sources.

Konstantin was very interested in Latvian society and politics and wanted to access Latvian and Russian perspectives on the same events. In the example, he described how he constantly tried to step outside his information circle and actively tried to access both Russian and Latvian spheres of information. The main motivation was to obtain a comprehensive understanding of current events. Other participants who consumed a variety of different sources did so because they were critical of the media in general. One such participant was Vadim in Riga. Just like Konstantin, he participated in a focus group and follow-up interview. Vadim had studied journalism in Russia and had a great interest in news, but he was critical towards the media in general and did not trust any media outlet. In a focus group discussion where the participants had described their media consumption, stating that they got their news from Facebook and Instagram, he added the following:

(Vadim, 29, Riga) I have an RSS programme with a newsletter on my computer, and I’m just sitting there and hooking up to the news, not every evening, but every two or three days. I don’t even read most of the news; I just pick up the news and open five, six, seven articles in an evening, and that’s it. It’s just all the media that I can put there. There’s Euronews, Delfi etcetera. Well, the Russian ones are there, starting with some *Meduza* and ending with Tsargrad.

(Moderator) But what if you had to pick three? Which ones would you keep?

(Vadim, 29, Riga) I wouldn’t keep anything. I would throw it all away [several participants start laughing]. I would probably only leave the news agencies, ITAR-TASS, Reuters, etcetera.

In the follow-up interview, Vadim explained that news agencies are the most convenient medium for people who want to be informed as they “present the news without some kind of nuance”. As will be shown in Chapters 7 and 8, Konstantin and Vadim were both heavy users but had different opinions of news media outlets in general and perceived the strategic narratives in opposite ways.

The heavy users also actively followed Russian state-controlled media broadcasting from Russia both out of curiosity and to get a Russian perspective on current events. For example, several participants mentioned that they watched the Russian state-controlled TV channel *Perviy Kanal* to see how they reported on the demolition of the Soviet monument in Riga in August 2022, which had become more difficult after March 2022 when all Russian media outlets were blocked in Latvia. Some participants watched Vladimir Solovyov's television programmes for entertainment because it was "such propaganda". Others stated that they also read Russian news agencies such as TASS and RIA Novosti to get information from Russia.

6.2.3 Selective users

The third group of participants can be described as selective users. These participants were more proactive in their news consumption and had the ambition to actively adjust their algorithms and create a selection of news sources that they trusted. This also included people who shared the same values and world views, such as YouTubers.

It was common among selective users to follow transnational public service media such as BBC News Russian and Deutsche Welle in Russian. This group also regularly watched Latvian public service media; most often, it was the Russian version through rus.LSM. Participants described rus.LSM as more of a slow media format that published more seldom and then posted longer texts and analyses compared to Delfi, which was described as fast media, "posting something new every five minutes".

Russian independent media outlets such as *Meduza* and *Dohzd* were common in this group. The Russian independent news website *Meduza* has been based in Riga since its launch in 2014 and has found a Russian-speaking audience in Latvia. Some participants mentioned listening to the Russian radio station Echo Moskvy before Roskomnadzor took it off the air in March 2022. Both *Meduza* and *Dohzd* primarily report on Russia but are common among Russian speakers outside of Russia and among Russian-speaking youth in Latvia.

The behaviour of limiting the number and screening the quality of news sources was reflected upon when discussing whether Russian media influenced a younger generation of Russian speakers in Latvia.

(Anastasia, 29, Riga) I have adjusted the algorithms on Facebook so that news only come from sources that I trust to some extent. Most often, I use YouTube. I listen to it all the time. If we're talking about Russian media, then it's mainly on YouTube and Facebook, which my feed and individual sites give me. Well, from such large, well-known media, it's mainly *Meduza*, *Dohzd*, Ekho Moskvy.

(Klara, 25, Riga) I subscribe to some media that interests me (...). I've noticed among my friends that [they] youth filter their information and subscribe to

media that interest them. I have the same. I watch *Meduza* and Dohzd; they are probably my favourites. Sometimes, I watch foreign media like BBC (...). I subscribe to Delfi on Facebook. If something pops up that looks interesting, I read it. If there's something that I don't like [in my feed], I'll just hide it.

(Ofeliya, 19, Daugavpils) The most common thing that I use is Telegram channels. I like to read collections from sources that I trust, that collect news from different sources. There, usually most of them have already been checked.

Anastasia, Klara and Ofeliya can be described as selective users. They actively limited their news media use and preferred to follow legacy media and also Russian oppositional media. Compared to heavy users, they would not actively look for information but either read the posts that show up in their feed or visit separate news media sites or channels they subscribe to and consume a tailored flow of information. Selective users were often positive towards Latvian authorities and identified with the Latvian state. They generally had a low interest in Russian state-controlled media, and many actively tried to avoid it by adjusting their social media feeds. They preferred balanced and unbiased news and had little interest in accessing conflicting news reporting or other perspectives, which was common among heavy users. Instead, they experienced that their news consumption from legacy media gave them all the information they needed.

6.2.4 News avoiders

The fourth and final group, called news avoiders, had little or no interest in following the news. These were participants who overall had a low interest in searching for news but described that if something major happened and they wanted to find more information about it, they would go to news portals and use search engines to get more information.

(Nikolai, 27, Daugavpils) I probably became such a person with age, that I don't want to be pressured by this information that something bad is happening in the world. I'm not distancing myself from it so [that] I don't know at all. (...) Why should I listen to what I most likely know? (...) I'm not that kind of person. [laughs] (...) Russian or Latvian media, it doesn't matter if it's German, I don't care, I treat all of them the same.

(Varya, 30, Daugavpils) I don't look for information, because I just don't have time for it. Every day I have a large flow of people and clients. Many people read and share their experiences. (...) I work with people all the time. They are my news portal. (...) It seems to me that turning on the news will spoil the mood for the rest of the day, so it's better not to include any news.

(Yelizaveta, 30, Liepāja) I read very little, only if it's some kind of incident here in Liepāja (...). It's not like I pour myself a cup of tea and read the news. I try my best to avoid it because, as you know, it's all designed to cause some

kind of negativity in people. Most of the news is negative and I want to read about the good and positive things happening in the world.

Nikolai, Varya and Yelizaveta all stressed the negativity of news and tried to actively avoid this negativity, a practice which also had become more widespread among participants following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Participants described that they saw little point in reading news that did not affect or interest them personally. Nikolai, Varya and Yelizaveta were sceptical of news media and questioned their independence and interests. They also perceived a strong relationship between Latvian politicians and different news outlets. Both Nikolai and Varya described in the follow-up interviews that Latvian news media were bought, did not report the whole truth and reported in favour of different politicians. News avoiders typically trusted personal sources more and found them to be less biased and more independent.

The practice of avoiding the news and their changed news consumption because of the war will be discussed in the next section.

6.3 Navigating a polarised media ecology

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was a major event and a turning point for the participants, so much so that they described their media consumption as before and after 24 February 2022. While all Russian media became banned in Latvia, the country also welcomed more than 200 independent Russian journalists and 23 media organisations. How did these events affect the participants' perception of news media outlets and their news media repertoires? Here is an example from a focus group in Liepāja, showing how two heavy users responded to the question of whether the invasion had affected them and their news media repertoires:

(Elmira, 19, Liepāja) For me it has changed a lot [laughs] I used to watch TV all the time, turn on the news in the background. (...) Now, I never turn it on. I don't get any news because one channel says one thing, and another says something completely different. (...) There's a lot of information that's very difficult to put in its place and create some order in my head. It's better for me to choose the news I'm interested in and somehow filter a little.

(Konstantin, 21, Liepāja) Not really. On the contrary, I was more convinced of the correctness of my approach to information. It's clear that over the past six months there have been even more fakes and manipulations. In general, it seems to me that thanks to this more balanced approach, I somehow succeed. In principle, it hasn't changed much.

The two cases exemplify two common reactions to current events such as the war and the total ban of Russian media in Latvia, which affected the participants. Konstantin, who consumed a variety of different news sources, did not

change his news consumption. He had noticed an increased flow of disinformation following the invasion, but he was only all the more convinced of his approach of reading and comparing different sources. One reason why he did not change his media repertoire could be that he already was used to exposing himself to conflicting messages and critically comparing different sources of information. Reading newspapers is also a slower form of consumption that encourages critical thinking, unlike watching television, which is a fast-paced medium where news quickly move from one topic to another, often passively consumed. Because of the pace, it can be more difficult for viewers to engage with the content critically. Newspapers often mostly rely on text and static images, whereas television uses visuals and music to engage viewers emotionally. Television news also present shorter stories, which makes critical engagement difficult as more complex information often is left out.

Elmira, an avid television viewer, decided to limit her news consumption after the invasion. She had gone from watching television all the time to limiting her consumption, as it was too difficult for her to make sense of the many conflicting messages. Feelings of information overload and cognitive dissonance as a result of the many conflicting messages were voiced by several other participants. Exposure to many opposing messages can create a sense of discomfort and feeling out of place (Ahmed, 2004b), where participants may limit their news media use to reduce feelings of discomfort and confusion.

Besides conflicting messages, participants voiced that the media ecology itself contributed to feelings of confusion.

(Sofiya, 21, Riga) I believe that the social media technology is made in such a way that all the media [that] have come out – the same Instagram, TikTok, Facebook – and they are trying to adapt all these news so that we can perceive it within a short time, which makes it very difficult to understand what's happening.

While social media networks and traditional news media organisations become increasingly connected, it becomes more challenging to understand what is happening when the news are shared at a high speed and the amount of information is increasing. In a fragmented media ecology, news reporting becomes fragmented when spread throughout different social media platforms, making it more difficult, especially for algorithmic users (the biggest group), to make sense of what is happening and where the information originally came from. Participants also expressed that their online news consumption created a feeling of disorder. In an increasingly fragmented and polarised media ecology, moments of discomfort may arise when participants encounter media outside of their regular repertoire or encounter information that challenges their perception emotionally.

How were groups with other news consumption repertoires affected by these events? Selective users typically increased their news consumption at the

beginning of the invasion but had to limit their media use again as it became too overwhelming. Here are two examples from focus groups in Daugavpils:

(Ofeliya, 19, Daugavpils) I'm less interested in these things now, simply because my brain burned out at some point. (...) In May [2022], I watched absolutely everything. (...) I collected information because it was important to me, [so that] if I suddenly had to talk to my mother about it, I could argue my point of view. But now (...) everyone has just come to terms with the fact that everything's bad, and we sit and feel sad. We're trying to move on with our lives and not pay attention.

(Ivan, 28, Daugavpils) I registered on Telegram when I realised that information from Russia would come out less [after 24 February 2022]. Before I was reading more, looking for information, but after this month, at the end of February [2022], I began to be much less interested in the news overall, although this is not typical for me. I just began to notice that I began to burn out when I read such terrible things [on Telegram].

Both Ofeliya and Ivan were selective users and shared the experience of emotional exhaustion due to an increased flow of information, which also was emotional in nature. Many participants initially increased their news consumption at the beginning of the invasion. One reason for doing so can be to reduce feelings of uncertainty and anxiety, where consuming news helps people feel more in control of the situation (Groot Kormelink & Klein Gunnewiek, 2022). Crises such as an invasion by a neighbouring country also create a need for critical updates regarding their own safety and how to protect themselves and their loved ones. Participants expressed that their news media consumption increased during the Covid-19 pandemic, as it was necessary to follow the news for updates regarding policy changes and restrictions and how these impacted their daily lives. Since crises often evolve quickly, people seek more information as major updates can emerge at any time.

One consequence of this behaviour was that participants eventually began to feel burned out, and to cope with such feelings, they tried to limit the news flow and shield themselves from the news they experienced as negative, massive and never ending. Many participants also expressed news fatigue after the pandemic, which was further increased by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As a result, selective users became even more selective in their news media consumption. Another solution could be to abstain from news altogether. Reduced interest in the news was also common among algorithmic users. For example, Mikhail in Riga had limited his news consumption:

(Mikhail, 25, Riga) Lately, I have tried to stay away from the news altogether because it needs to be constantly double-checked. You receive a huge amount of information per day. Even if you don't want to, through context advertising on social networks (...), you willingly or unwillingly still receive this

information. (...) It provokes you to double-check it later to find out because there are some discussions about it and comments and conversations.

Constantly trying to read and compare many different sources of information and doing so for an extended period as an information-seeking strategy may lead to burnout, which could be seen during the pandemic (Vandenplas et al., 2021). Similarly, feelings of information overload and mental strain have been confirmed by previous studies during the pandemic, where avoiding the news serves as a coping mechanism to shield oneself (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). Double-checking information is labour intensive and may lead to avoiding the news altogether, as described by Mikhail. News avoiders were less affected by the war. They had already limited their news consumption and had long perceived the news reporting as primarily negative. For example, Varya in Daugavpils said:

(Varya, 30, Daugavpils) I think that many people are now kind of fencing themselves off from the flow of a lot of information because there's so much negativity. We have been living in negativity for three years now. At first, it was Covid. Now it's other people who don't know what the future holds for them, so they are trying to at least preserve some emotions, some kind of reliability.

News avoiders already had a low interest in keeping up with the news and often instead relied on social contacts for information. Receiving information indirectly could shield them from the distress of direct exposure. Some people, however, may feel peer pressure from family members to engage with news events. One reason for not following the news that Varya and other news avoiders voiced was that they wanted to engage only with personally relevant information. Like Mikhail, however, participants expressed difficulties in limiting their news consumption online, where information tended to pop up.

What does this mean, then, for the projection and reception of strategic narratives? While participants' news media repertoires did not change drastically, most participants would still have different levels of interest in following the news; many participants had to different extents limited their consumption following the war. While the strategic narratives were projected in a polarised media ecology where emotional content tends to get more clicks and shares, limiting their news consumption also meant limiting their exposure to such narratives, particularly since many participants expressed that they lost interest in following Russian state-controlled media, as will be discussed in the next section. Due to news fatigue, however, people may become more vulnerable to simplified narratives because they do not have the energy or motivation to evaluate complex or conflicting information critically. As voiced by Mikhail, some may not have the energy to fact-check or seek out alternative sources and perspectives. This may lead to passively accepting narratives, especially from sources they deem trustworthy, such as certain YouTubers.

Crises such as wars often increase the speed of reporting, which may result in greater risks for news media outlets. They can either amplify unverified information or report incomplete information, contributing to increased scepticism towards news media outlets, particularly when they take some information out of context to fit an existing narrative. Participants also expressed an increased awareness of news media outlets favouring one side or perspective in their news reporting. Reduced levels of trust in traditional news media outlets may result in participants turning to alternative sources of information, some of which present themselves as the opposition of ‘corrupt’ mainstream media. Given the increased circulation of conspiracy media, there is a risk that narratives with simple solutions to complex problems may resonate with a disillusioned audience.

6.3.1 Losing interest in Russian state-controlled media

Besides limiting their news consumption, many participants also described that they lost interest in following Russian state-controlled media after 24 February 2022. This is an important finding for how Russian strategic narratives can persuade in this context. Participants in focus groups described Russian state-controlled media as hateful and full of lies. For example, Ofeliya in Daugavpils had limited her news consumption and excluded Russian state-controlled media because of their hateful rhetoric:

(Ofeliya, 19, Daugavpils) It’s always hate propaganda. No matter what programme you watch, it’s always hateful to someone or something, and it’s very unpleasant and, of course, a feeling of absolute absurdity. (...) It’s a very destructive experience, very toxic, and I really felt better when I arrived [to Riga], and all that content just went out of my life. Because there are two TVs at home [in Daugavpils] and they both broadcast all this, they put a lot of emphasis on it. I even came home [to Daugavpils] a week ago, and it was terrible. You sit in the kitchen and listen to something heavy in your soul. That’s why I have a very negative experience. Sometimes I shake with anger, although I’m a very non-aggressive person, but when you see how brazenly all this is done and how bad these presenters sometimes say things.

Ofeliya had just left home and moved to Riga to study and described how the hateful propaganda in the Russian state-controlled media affected her physically. She and other participants described how Russian state-controlled television also had become more aggressive and more toxic over the years.

The domestic Russian audience is also becoming tired of the rhetoric being shouted at them about the war on state-controlled television every day. Kremlin messaging on TV has also become less popular (Brendan, 2023). The hateful rhetoric on Russian state-controlled television was also commented on by Anatoli, who was in the same focus group as Ofeliya:

(Anatoli, 29, Daugavpils) The Russian media is full of propaganda. To be honest, they have discredited themselves lately, and I've watched a lot of it. It's not just an opinion from the outside, I've watched a lot. I've tried to force myself to watch their official state channels. I tolerated this, but at a certain point, I just stopped.

While Ofeliya had little interest in finding out the perspective of Russian state-controlled media, others, like Anatoli, had actively followed the news from Russian state-controlled media to also get the perspective of the Russian Federation on current events. Many explained, however, that since the invasion, they had no interest in finding out what was being said in Russian state-controlled media. When a narrative is pushed too aggressively, it can lead to a loss of credibility as the audience recognises it as emotionally manipulative and questions the authenticity of the information and the source. Participants explained they may turn away from such sources and seek alternative information from independent Russian journalists or YouTubers.

Besides losing interest in Russian state-controlled media because of their hateful rhetoric, some participants turned away from state-controlled media because of the untrustworthy information. They explained that there was no point in trying to find out Russia's point of view anymore because "it was all lies" and had "little to no connection with reality". For example, Vadim in Riga said:

(Vadim, 29, Riga) I used to read in order to somehow see what their [Russia's] point of view is, but the further they go, the more they are there [in Ukraine], there's no point in even trying to read it at all, because there are absolutely all lies. It has been impossible to read them at all for a long time. They used to try somehow, at least. There was some truthful information and some lies, but it was possible to analyse it somehow. Now you just read, and the rhetoric is already quite aggressive, so militaristic, and the information is absolutely not objective.

Like Anatoli, Vadim, a heavy user, had lost interest in following Russian state-controlled media. Instead, he had turned to Russian military bloggers like Igor Girkin to discover what was happening in Russia. His motivation for doing so was that the gap between the official line and the reality on the ground had widened. While Vadim was aware that the information also included lies, he expressed that they now had completely lost touch with reality to the point that they had become irrelevant as a news source.

Another reason for losing interest in Russian state-controlled media was that it was considered old-fashioned and associated with an older generation that had grown up in the Soviet Union. Many participants expressed having grown up with Russian television at home and reflected upon the role their parents had played regarding their media consumption and their perception of the world:

(Nika, 19, Daugavpils) Young people are more loyal [to Latvia], but it all depends on your upbringing, if you listen directly to your parents. I listen to their opinion and at least [have] the same point of view for all political views. But if you have a freer family, and you can have your own opinion, which you know how to defend, then you may have completely different views than your parents.

(Liza, 22, Daugavpils) I also believe that first our parents will educate us, then when we become more conscious when we get older. (...) I thought about what I used to think at a younger age when I didn't watch and didn't read any news on the internet. (...) I thought Putin was the best president in the world.

(Yaroslav, 19, Daugavpils) How easy it was ...

(Liza, 22, Daugavpils) How cool it would have been if he was president in Latvia. And then I began to analyse, to think, "I have never been to Russia, no matter how much I watch the news. Why do I have such an opinion?" Little by little, I began to realise the whole truth.

Similar to Ofeliya and other participants, Nika, Liza and Yaroslav had grown up in Daugavpils with Russian television. Through television and their family, they had been taught a Russian perspective. Around the age of 14 to 16, they had started to discover oppositional Russian media and YouTubers and began to question the perspective projected via Russian state-controlled television. Several participants described Russian television, in general, as old-fashioned and mainly targeting an older generation with programmes that appeal to their taste, such as programmes about historical events or Soviet nostalgia. For young people, Russian state-controlled television was perceived as conservative and outdated.

Tensions between participants and their parents also grew during the war, as many relatives continued to watch Russian state-controlled television and rejected the reporting of oppositional Russian media on the war altogether. For example, Klara had discussions with her father about media:

(Klara, 25, Riga) My dad and my grandmother believe that Putin's great, they believe that he's a liberator. (...) Now, too, and my dad, for example, says to me, "Have you been brainwashed? I'm telling you this, you have been brainwashed." He likes to watch only Russian media, and I also tell him, for example, about Dohzd, about *Meduza*, and he says that it's propaganda media, that they're paid for by America.

Like Ofeliya, Klara described in a follow-up interview how she had stopped discussing the situation with her relatives because they continued to watch Russian television and fully believed what was said about the war on Russian state-controlled television while rejecting other news sources and opposing information completely. However, while participants described Russian state-controlled television as hateful and aggressive, out of touch with reality and associated with an older generation of Russian speakers, many participants,

regardless of their level of interest in the news, regularly watched Russian influencers on YouTube and indirectly consumed Russian state media content, as will be discussed in the next section.

6.3.2 Putting trust in Russian YouTubers

While the participants rejected Russian state-controlled television, most turned to YouTube for news. The platform was described as useful for learning about the news and as a way for them to get trustworthy information about what was happening in Russia. For example, Polina in Riga, who was a news avoider but occasionally watched videos on the platform, said:

(Polina, 21, Riga) YouTube's a very good platform for learning news, including what's happening in Russia. Russian bloggers like Varlamov, for example. When a person isn't fully immersed in politics, they make some news report, and you understand that this person can be trusted. Not that there's a certain position or anything like that. They talk about the news. It's interesting to listen to it, and you roughly understand that you're not listening to some prepared text, I don't know, like on television, for example.

In the example, Polina compared popular YouTubers like Varlamov with traditional news reporting on television, which most participants experienced as outdated, with long monologues and formal news anchors. Varlamov was considered to be authentic and informal. YouTubers often present themselves as authentic and relatable even though their content is carefully prepared to resonate with the right audience. For younger audiences, this creates a strong sense of trust and emotional connection, particularly in a media ecology where traditional media is met with scepticism. This is an interesting finding, as participants may be more susceptible to strategic narratives projected via a YouTuber they trust and perceive as humorous and conversational. The relaxed style makes the news more approachable, and the YouTubers' personal connection with their subscribers creates a feeling of trust. Participants also described how they follow YouTubers as a way to limit their news consumption:

(Viktoriya, 26, Riga) I watch YouTube for quality entertainment content in my pastime in the evening. I watch news from Ruslan Usachev. He has quite short ones, for 20–30 minutes, the most basic news there for a couple of weeks, [it] is world-wide, including some of the world's biggest news, clear and to the point.

(Susanna, 23, Liepāja) That's why I watch him [Ruslan Usachev], to limit myself to some news at the same time, so that I don't read everything, I don't read the whole stream. I like his opinion, I agree with and listen to him.

Following popular YouTubers like Varlamov and Usachev was for many participants a way to limit the flow of information and at the same time get news

information from a trusted source. While they were popular among news avoiders, participants regardless of news consumption repertoire followed Russian YouTubers to varying extents. YouTubers' format with quick and to-the-point videos resonated with participants, who explained that YouTubers often use humour and visuals to explain the news in an entertaining way. This way of reporting makes complex topics more engaging and easier to understand, particularly for participants who find traditional news boring or too complicated. The format also fits well with the fast-paced online environment, where younger audiences are used to quick videos that grab their attention.

The fact that participants expressed trust in YouTubers while not being as critical of them as they were towards traditional news media outlets is an interesting finding since YouTubers do not have the same obligations as journalists to be impartial in their reporting. Yet, few participants reflected on YouTubers potentially being biased too and that their comments regarding the news are just that – comments. In a discussion, Ulyana and Susanna in Liepāja disagreed on whether YouTubers like Varlamov could be considered a journalist or news media outlet:

(Susanna, 23, Liepāja) Sometimes, I don't like his [Varlamov] position because it can be very negative, but listening to him is interesting. I started listening to him when he was a simple person who reviewed cities. He travelled around countries and reviewed cities. Then, it all turned out that he started covering the news. (...) I listen to him because he explains his point of view, he says who, how and why. Sometimes, he does reports. For example, yesterday, they blew up the bridge between ...

(Moderator) The Crimean Bridge.

(Susanna, 23, Liepāja) ... the Crimean Bridge, and then he abruptly made a video for 8 minutes. So, I watched it, this is how I found out this information, then I went to read something.

(Ulyana, 23, Liepāja) I don't think he's a media outlet. He used these videos for this, of course, the news that he learned from other sources, but he just states his whole opinion.

Ulyana stressed that Varlamov gives his opinion, using information from traditional news media. When reflecting upon the popularity of Russian YouTubers like Varlamov and why so many young people trust him, besides his relaxed reporting, charisma was mentioned as an important quality. Similar to Polina, who experienced that Varlamov was not following a scripted text, participants explained that how the information was conveyed was important for whether they would pay attention to that YouTuber or news media outlet. It is common for Russian YouTubers to discuss excerpts from Russian state-controlled media. Many YouTubers actively critique legacy media, and this critical stance often resonates with younger people who are more sceptical of authorities and prefer independent voices.

While following Russian YouTubers was a way of finding out what was being shown on Russian television, some felt that they had to limit their consumption of Russian YouTubers as well because they had become too focused on Russian state-controlled television:

(Evgeni, 19, Daugavpils) Before, I also used to watch a critical analysis with this [Maxim] Katz, but because you have these reports about [Vladimir] Solovyov, I have enough at home because my grandfather lives at home. He's a war veteran and a little deaf, every day he sends me a bunch of state Russian media from state Russian TV channels, and this information is enough for me. That's why I stopped watching Katz a bit because the vaults are full. [participants laugh]

Evgeni's relatives constantly watched Russian television at home. As a result, he decided to limit his time on YouTube, as it was too focused on Russian state-controlled television. This generational divide deepens the gap between the content shared through state-controlled television and the content that resonates with younger audiences on YouTube.

For the projection and reception of strategic narratives, putting trust in Russian YouTubers means that young Russian speakers expose themselves to Russian narratives even if they limit their consumption of Russian state-controlled media content. Just because a YouTuber is critical of the Russian government does not mean that they do not project narratives that resonate with the strategic narratives projected by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. While young people trust YouTubers to be independent creators, YouTubers are not always transparent regarding who funds them and how they make money on the platform.

There are cases where the Russian government, especially since the invasion of Ukraine, has encouraged YouTubers and other influencers on social media to produce content that aligns with the government's strategic narratives or to avoid politically sensitive issues and instead focus on more neutral topics. The Russian government also uses platforms like YouTube to share their news content and project strategic narratives, for example via RT and Sputnik. Russia has also increasingly tried to censor information online by pressuring platforms to remove what they call extremist content. Russia also labels independent YouTubers as foreign agents. Russia's crackdown on independent media, however, makes them more popular among a younger audience.

In a polarised media ecology, YouTubers often serve as emotional anchors for younger audiences trying to navigate a constant flow of conflicting information. Papacharissi's (2014) notion of affective publics can offer explanations for YouTubers' emotional appeal among a younger audience. Participating live during broadcasts can be emotionally satisfying, allowing participants to feel part of a community. Some participants mentioned the Russian oppositional leader and anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny as an important

figure when they were growing up. He was very active on YouTube and successfully engaged younger audiences emotionally and politically before his death. This sense of belonging among audiences is emotionally constructed. It is important to remember, however, that YouTubers depend on sponsors and subscriptions, which may result in self-censorship or avoidance of certain topics to not lose sponsors or subscriptions.

6.4 Discussion

How do young Russian speakers in Latvia perceive and navigate the media ecology in which these strategic narratives are projected? The findings in this chapter suggest that the strategic narratives are projected in a polarised and fragmented media ecology consisting of Latvian and Russian news media outlets. As voiced by Miskimmon et al. (2017, p. 13), it is one thing to say whether a narrative is dominant or hegemonic and another to explain how and why a narrative dominates public discourse. To do so, we must account for how the narrative is communicated and how the characteristics of a specific media ecology enable and constrain the narrative. How, when and why do media ecologies make a difference? Under what conditions may strategic narratives be persuasive in this context?

New technology and rapid developments impact the media ecology, affecting the distribution and form of authority, legitimacy and power (Miskimmon et al., 2017, p. 10). The volume, speed and diversity of sources in a digital media ecology create a high-choice online environment. As a result, news reporting becomes increasingly fragmented when spread throughout different social media platforms, making it more difficult to make sense of what is happening and where the information is originally coming from. This development creates fertile soil for strategic narratives to be projected, as their emotional content risks limiting our ability to deconstruct or think about a text critically. This process of critical reflection is becoming increasingly difficult in a fast-paced environment where unverified news and opinions are spread instantly.

This chapter has explored young Russian speakers' perceptions of news media outlets and their criteria for including news in their news media repertoires. The findings have shown that they consume news mainly on social media, where Russian YouTubers have replaced traditional television. Furthermore, we have seen how Russia's war in Ukraine has influenced their news media consumption and perception of Russian state-controlled media.

Participants expressed scepticism towards traditional news media outlets, both Latvian and Russian. Instead, they preferred news to be as objective, balanced and to the point as possible without the journalist's opinion being visible in the reporting. They also had negative experiences with certain news media outlets, which they perceived to either regularly use clickbait or take

information out of context. Participants also experienced the news media to be politically biased. This is an important finding, as participants' perceptions of news media outlets can shape how they interpret the news. Suppose a narrative is projected by a source perceived to have a political agenda; they might interpret the narrative through that lens and assume it is intended to manipulate their opinion, or simply dismiss it as propaganda.

Four groups of news media repertoires were identified based on participants' media use and preferences: algorithmic users, heavy users, selective users and news avoiders. They are ideal types, but most participants could be sorted into one of these groups. Heavy users are more likely to expose themselves to various narratives and perspectives, while news avoiders rely more on friends and eyewitnesses on social media as first-hand sources. Participants with higher media literacy skills tend to be more adept at recognising strategic narratives. They may question the framing, choice of words and sources used. Individuals with low media literacy skills may take these narratives at face value and be less critical. Selective users had little to no interest in Russian state-controlled media. The algorithmic users were, like heavy users, also exposed to different narratives, but to different extents depending on their media use and algorithms. Depending on their news interests, they were, like news avoiders, to a greater extent exposed to emotional narratives that were shared by friends and relatives and circulated online through paid advertisements and sponsored posts.

The diversity of sources can affect how narratives are interpreted, as a narrow range of news sources may lead to interpretations shaped by a limited perspective. In contrast, a broader spectrum of news sources may lead to a more critical interpretation as participants can better compare and contrast different perspectives. Similarly, active consumption may allow for more critical engagement. In contrast, passive consumption of news through social media may result in the acceptance of narratives without much critical analysis. The platforms often provide content based on algorithms of personal preference, making it less likely for narratives to be questioned. Social media algorithms may also result in participants interpreting narratives in a way that aligns with what they are accustomed to seeing rather than questioning the broader context or the intent behind such narratives.

What does it mean for the reception of strategic narratives that participants get most of their news via social media? Participants associated television with an older generation, and Russian television channels were seen as one-sided and biased because they focused on Russia through a distinctly Russian lens. This might create a sense of cultural disconnect for younger Russian speakers who have grown up in Latvia and have fewer connections to Russia. The lack of interest results from shifting media use habits and different values.

The participants overall had a low interest in Russian state-controlled media. Following 2022, their interest in following Russian state media dropped even further, as it was described as hateful and too detached from reality in its

reporting. These findings are confirmed by a previous study by Bērziņa et al. (2023), where young Russian speakers in Latvia consumed Russian media to a limited extent and few admitted to watching Russian television. Some claimed they were not interested in Russia, while others followed Russian opposition bloggers. They found that young Russian speakers' minimal television consumption limited the effects of Russian state-controlled television. Their diverse media consumption habits also meant that Russian-speaking youth were exposed to different sources of information that limited the influence of the historical narratives Russia promoted.

Compared to their parents, young Russian speakers often embrace Russian independent media. Doing so can offer them a sense of independence and a sense of belonging to a Latvian or European context. Younger participants may view their parents as less malleable to the Latvian media ecology and dependent on Russian television. The difference in media preferences may impact family dynamics because parents and children may have different understandings of current events, which can lead to conflict or misunderstandings. For example, while parents may trust the official portrayal of events on Russian state-controlled television, children might challenge these views with alternative information found online, such as on independent Russian news media outlets.

Having explored Russian independent YouTubers during the formative period of young adulthood, they may have a different attitude towards political and cultural issues resulting from the media through which they form their views (Bolin, 2017). People of similar age who have been socialised under similar socio-political conditions tend to reveal similar news media repertoires (Vittadini et al., 2013). Compared to their parents, young Russian speakers tend to consume content in both Russian and Latvian and use global digital platforms, while the older generation may prefer Russian language content and rely on Russian state-controlled television for news.

Following Russian YouTubers also creates a sense of belonging, and their collective media experiences shape a younger generation emotionally. Being online also creates a sense of belonging that ties individuals together and contributes to creating a distinct generational consciousness that is seen as different from an older generation (Papacharissi, 2014). Social media platforms play a distinct part in this process. In a chaotic world, YouTubers provide reassurance and comfort. The video format is also as emotionally compelling as television, if not more so, because of the connection and interaction with others in the comment sections or live chats.

Being socialised with a particular set of media creates generational variations in media literacy, trust in media and expectations of how the media should function. The findings suggest that participants' habits of watching Russian YouTubers could be seen as a way of indirectly consuming Russian state-controlled media and ultimately exposing themselves to Russian strategic narratives, particularly since it is interpreted with reference to and in

the context of legacy media consumption. Their high level of trust and uncritical approach to charismatic Russian YouTubers could also make participants more susceptible to information influence activities. Most participants did not necessarily reflect upon the possibility that YouTubers also have sponsors and that their independence could be questioned. Furthermore, these YouTubers are not trained journalists and are more likely to share false or unverified information accidentally. They do, however, compete with traditional news media.

How, when and why do media ecologies make a difference? Under what conditions may strategic narratives be persuasive in this context? Strategic narratives that are sensational and resonate with audiences emotionally are more likely to gain traction and be shared online when picked up by different news media outlets and YouTubers. In this way, media ecologies influence the flow, accessibility and interpretation of information. They become particularly significant during moments of crisis and war, when the dissemination and framing of information can profoundly influence public opinion. When news reporting is too intense and offers no movement or release, it can lead us to turn off the news and avoid social media (Papacharissi, 2019).

By reading news in both Latvian and Russian, however, young Russian speakers are more likely to expose themselves to Latvian and Russian narratives of the same events. By doing so, they tend to be more likely to understand the concerns and viewpoints of both Latvian speakers and Russian speakers, especially in a society where language plays a significant role in the political discourse and for national identity.

Concluding remarks

This chapter has presented the media ecology in which Russian strategic narratives were projected and received by young Russian speakers in Latvia. Navigating a polarised and fragmented hybrid media ecology, participants were generally sceptical towards news media outlets. They got their news mainly from social media and Russian YouTubers and perceived Russian state-controlled television as old-fashioned and propagandistic. Four groups of news media repertoires were identified: algorithmic users, heavy users, selective users and news avoiders. To different extents, they are more likely to expose themselves to various narratives and perspectives than their parents and relatives, who rely mainly on Russian state-controlled media. Russia's war in Ukraine created a drop in the interest in following Russian state-controlled media, and participants limited their news media consumption to different extents. How young Russian speakers make sense of the strategic narratives will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 7.

7 Making sense through modes of reception

This chapter focuses on the reception process of the strategic narratives as described in Chapter 5. Using Michelle's model of reception, this chapter explores denotative levels of meaning in how participants make sense of the strategic narratives projected in Sputnik Latvia. More specifically, transparent, referential and mediated modes of reception are examined. Connotative levels of meaning are explored in Chapter 8. This separation serves to show and discuss the interpretation of the form and content of the narrative texts in depth and to keep interpretations of ideological messages separate. Although denotative and connotative levels of meaning interact when participants decode the text on both levels simultaneously, this approach contributes to a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of the reception of narratives. Affect and emotions are included to interpret the reception process as moving between different modes of reception when making sense of different strategic narratives. Depending on how affectively invested participants are, they do close or distant readings of the narratives.

The chapter follows a case-by-case structure: the sections on the removal of Russian language education, the closing of Russian channels and the ban of the St George ribbon all follow a similar pattern, showing how participants move between different denotative levels of meaning when discussing the different texts. The chapter ends with an overall discussion of participants' sensemaking process when discussing the texts and the role of affect in this process.

7.1 The removal of Russian language education

The text on the education reform in Latvia and the alleged forced assimilation and discrimination of the Russian-speaking population was most of the time initially met with a distant, critical mediated reading by the participants. Having read the text, most participants started discussing it by commenting on its format and the way it was written. In a mediated mode, participants focused on how the text was constructed, which often took the form of a positive or negative evaluation of the quality of the text. Such evaluations were made by moving to a referential reading in which participants compared the text with their personal experience. There were also instances of transparent readings.

7.1.1 Emotional headlines

When discussing the text on the education reform, it was common among participants to initially take a distant mediated reading, focusing on the words of the text. What was mentioned first in almost every focus group was the headline. Participants emphasised expressions such as “undisguised discrimination” (*neprikrytaja diskriminacija*) and “Zakharova crushed (*razgromila*) the education reform”.

(Oksana, 22, Riga) I didn’t like the headline “razgromila” [laughs].

(Moderator) What didn’t you like? Why?

(Oksana, 22, Riga) Well ... how to say it. It gets personal from the very beginning.

(Moderator) Well, such a headline that immediately makes you want to read.

(Oksana, 22, Riga) Yes, the headline is loud, but a little... [scrunches up her face]

(Vladimir, 30, Riga) If you start scanning the article, it immediately begins [with] propaganda buzzwords, let’s say “de-Russification”, “destructive Latvian authorities”. In other words, it’s a very clear, well-prepared text and has a certain construction, one can even say.

As mentioned in Chapter 6, participants preferred news media to be as objective as possible, sticking to facts without journalists’ personal opinions present in the text. Oksana and Vladimir were news avoiders and were critical of legacy media in general, regardless of origin. Their examples show mediated readings where the form of the text was assessed based on journalistic criteria and norms. Oksana reacted negatively to the headline as being too loud and described that the text was personal from the beginning. Vladimir called the text straightforwardly propagandistic. In the focus group, he later described that he considered this text typical of how Russian state-controlled media usually write about Latvia, emphasising that some words are often mentioned in this context.

The use of expressions like “de-Russification” and “forced assimilation” was mentioned in other focus groups, too. As stated by Vladimir, these were often used in Russian strategic narratives about Latvia (also see Chapter 5). Both terms are saturated with affect and could be described as what Ahmed (2004b) would call ‘sticky’. They are sticky due to their repetition and their historical associations with Sovietisation and Russification (see chapter on context). Did the participants pick up on the affective use of words? While Oksana and Vladimir considered the headline to be loud and propagandistic, other participants emphasised the negativity and emotionality of the text:

(Viktoriya, 26, Riga) It's clear that the article is very populist. It's very thunderous ... I mean, a clearly expressed opinion can be seen in the article. We're not presented with the dry fact that Latvia violates some conventions. It's like everything here, the text is framed based on how bad it is.

(Vera, 27, Daugavpils) You can understand everything from the headline. It follows from the title that the article will incline the reader in a certain direction: "Zakharova crushed the education reform in Latvia". Let's say, we're talking about some normal media outlet, it would be more likely to call the article "Maria Zakharova's comments on the education reform in Latvia", but they immediately crushed it here.

Viktoriya and Vera had different news preferences but shared similar opinions on how they believed a news article should be written and they made a negative assessment of the text. For example, when discussing her media use, Viktoriya stated that she was not a regular news reader but liked to read news in a neutral form and disliked texts that try to form "some kind of opinion in your head" in that they urge her to have a certain opinion. In the quote, Viktoriya calls the text populist in how it is written with a clear opinion present. Similar to Oksana, she described the text as thunderous. In addition, Vera gave an example of what a news text would look like according to other journalistic standards.

Some participants reflected upon what emotions the words in the text created in the audience when reading the text and described the way it was written as firing up negative emotions among Russian speakers:

(Yaroslav, 19, Daugavpils) What wouldn't a person do after [reading] this article? In my opinion, the headline is very loud, as are the very loud words used by Zakharova herself. (...) "Forced assimilation". I have at once the desire to light torches and go on strike.

(Emiliya, 24, Riga) For me, it's written as it's written. I agree that there are many words like "de-Russification" and "destructive". Initially, there's a lot of negativity. Immediately, you get some negative emotions, and accordingly, you want to fill it with bad thoughts and go on strike.

While Emiliya was not negative towards the form of the text, both Emiliya and Yaroslav agreed that the headline and words provoked negative feelings and created a desire to take radical action.

7.1.2 Exaggeration of the problem

Besides commenting on the text's wording, some participants questioned the accuracy of the information mentioned. In doing so, they moved between a mediated and a referential reading, comparing what was written with their experience of being Russian speakers in Latvia. Participants pointed out that if one was reading these texts without knowing the actual situation in Latvia,

one could get the impression that the situation for Russian speakers in Latvia was really bad:

(Varya, 30, Daugavpils) If I read about it ... For example, if I'm in Russia, if I'm Russian, and I don't know what's going on in Latvia, of course, I will be outraged. I mean, it would be a kind of belittling.

When reading the text, Varya shifted to a referential mode, comparing the text and how it was written to what was going on in Latvia, suggesting that the text was exaggerating. Leonid in Daugavpils questioned statements such as “40 per cent of inhabitants in Latvia speak Russian”, describing that knowing Russian and speaking Russian at home were not the same as only knowing Russian:

(Leonid, 30, Daugavpils) Most likely, this is really manipulation. I liked “despite the fact that about 40 per cent of the residents in Latvia speak Russian”. It would be better to write what percentage only speaks Russian. That's what's important here. We will agree on everything in three or more languages. We're in these percentages [laughs]. We don't care in what language we receive education, we receive education in Latvian without any problems. That's why the percentage is manipulative. It turns out that for those who read these news in Russia, it's like, “Damn, half the state is oppressed. This all needs to be protected right away, these are our guys”.

In this example, Leonid questioned the number of Russian speakers in Latvia by comparing it to his own lived experience. According to him, the number was inflated and Russian speakers in Latvia would get education in Latvian without any concerns and that this was an attempt to make the situation look worse than it actually was. Leonid also asked himself if the inflation of the numbers was a way to make it look like almost half of the population was being discriminated against by this education reform. Similar to Varya, he speculated what a reader in Russia would think when reading the text. The percentage of Russian speakers could be used as a way to justify an intervention by Russia in Latvia to protect “our guys”, in other words, Russian speakers in Latvia. This is an interesting observation, as protecting Russian compatriots abroad is part of Russian foreign policy and has been used as an excuse to use military force in Georgia and Ukraine.

Another example where participants questioned the accuracy of information was the notion of “mass protests”, which was discussed in a focus group in Daugavpils. When discussing the text, participants confirmed that protests against the education reform indeed had taken place but questioned whether they could be considered ‘mass’ protests. In that particular focus group, one participant jokingly stated that a group of ten people would be considered a mass in Latvia, followed by laughter from the other focus group

participants. The practice of exaggerating the problem was also mentioned in other groups, for example by Anton:

(Anton, 29, Daugavpils) It seems this [text] attempts to create a scandal about some invented problem, as if all schools were switching to Latvian, but in my opinion, this does not infringe on Russian speakers in any way. They can even speak Russian, it seems.

Anton was a selective news media user and turned to a referential mode when he considered the text's problem to be inflated and exaggerated compared to his own experience. Like previous examples, the text was interpreted as an attempt to create a scandal and blow the problem out of proportion. Another example of a referential mode of reception was Mikhail's interpretation of the text, where he expanded his comment to other media texts as well:

(Mikhail, 25, Riga) When this problem is discussed, they don't accurately cover what's happening. We're not talking about a ban on teaching the Russian language, we're talking about transferring languages. (...) The Russian language itself will be studied in schools in the same way.

Like Anton, Mikhail described that the problem was not accurately covered by the media and stated that Russian speakers would still be able to speak Russian and study the Russian language. As shown in the previous chapter, Mikhail had limited his news consumption because he often saw news that he considered to be distorted or taken out of context. While Varya, Leonid, Anton and Mikhail thought that the problem was exaggerated and did not reflect reality, other participants questioned the newsworthiness of the text. For example, Anastasia, a selective news media user, used her own experience to assess the text. She reacted to the fact that the reform was presented as news and compared what was written to her own personal experience of attending a Russian school as a child and taking part in school protests with her parents in 2004:

(Anastasia, 29, Riga) I wouldn't even read this article, because, as it's written, there's a gradual transition to education in the state language. I'm 29. I've been hearing this phrase for about 15 years or more. Gradual, it began a long time ago. It's happening, and it's happening successfully or not, but all this is written as if it's some novelty.

By pointing out that the education reform was not a new phenomenon but a gradual process over the past 15 years, Anastasia and other participants questioned the newsworthiness of the text. She had been hearing about the reform for a long time and had personally experienced it going to a Russian school. As such, the text failed to live up to the participants' expectations of what constitutes a newsworthy article and created little interest in reading it.

While previous examples presented critical readings of the text, there were participants who moved between a transparent and a referential reading, where the text was confirmed by their own experience. For example, Nika in Daugavpils stated:

(Nika, 19, Daugavpils) I've read before that there were strikes about the fact that we now have fully Latvian language training. I agree that this is simply a violation of our rights. Preschool children can't study in their native language. (...) It seems to me that the percentages, the dates of a particular institution, the person: this shows that it isn't just taken from somewhere, but specific data.

Nika was an algorithmic user and agreed with the information in the text. Like Anastasia, she remembered the protests, but in her case it was probably the protests from 2018, when new steps were taken in the process of reforming the education system. As such, this experience was fairly recent for Nika, who considered the reform to be an infringement of her rights as a Russian speaker in Latvia. She also considered the information in the text trustworthy, which was particularly common among younger participants in Liepāja. This was most probably because the reform directly affected them when it was decided in 2018 that secondary education should be taught solely in the Latvian language.

Overall, younger participants made closer and more transparent readings than older participants. One possible explanation could be that younger participants were either still in high school or had recently finished their studies and, as such, had studied solely in Latvian towards the end of their schooling. Older participants were not as affected by the gradual reform as the younger cohort and also had more distance to the topic. Thus, personal experience and closeness to the topic were more influential than the form of the narrative text regarding participants' sensemaking.

7.1.3 Rejection of Russian actors

When discussing the text on the education reform, it was common for participants to comment on the actors present in the text. Moving between a transparent and a referential mode of reading, participants focused mainly on Maria Zakharova, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' spokesperson who was mentioned in the text, and their experience of her. Participants described Zakharova as a "stupid Russian propagandist" and a "trigger word" that created negative feelings towards the text. Leonid, who was suspicious of the number stated in the text, initially stated the following when he was asked to share his opinion of the media text in the focus group:

(Leonid, 30, Daugavpils) First, naturally, Zakharova.

(Moderator) She's nice?

(Leonid, 30, Daugavpils) It's a trigger word.

(Moderator) Why?

(Leonid, 30, Daugavpils) She's a very stupid woman. [participants laugh] Well, judging by the latest events, how much I see her sometimes ... It's very strange to me that she works in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and somehow represents the state. I don't know, she really needs to be broadcast somewhere on REN TV programmes about space aliens. These three conventions were adopted over the years, but this is such a manipulation.

Leonid was an algorithmic user and, similar to Anastasia in Riga, he reacted to the newsworthiness of the text and to Zakharova's presence there. Describing Zakharova as a trigger word meant she contributed to a negative overall impression of the text. This was common in focus groups, where participants like Isak in Riga described that when seeing Zakharova's name in the headline, one could more or less assume how the rest of the text would turn out:

(Isak, 19, Riga) Reading the text closely, my hair stands on end from all sorts of phrases and revolutions. [laughs] Knowing how Zakharova ... What she usually says. You don't have to read the article, you will understand what will happen there.

Isak, similar to Leonid, described Zakharova negatively and expressed how her presence caused a negative physical reaction in him. Reacting physically resonates with Leonid's description of her name as a trigger word. Another example where Zakharova was discussed in a negative way was in this quote from Yelizaveta in Liepāja:

(Yelizaveta, 30, Liepāja) I don't understand why Zakharova says anything at all [laughs], what the hell will it do to me that she said something there?

(Moderator) She's a clever woman?

(Yelizaveta, 30, Liepāja) They should solve problems in their own country. [laughs] They're discussing the problems of other countries. I think it's garbage. This article is just cramming people's brains, they don't need this information. It just causes them all this indignation and unpleasant feelings.

Like Emiliya and Yaroslav, Yelizaveta described how the text and Zakharova caused unpleasant feelings within her and described the text as not providing any useful information. She also rejected Russia and Zakharova as actors. Yelizaveta was a news avoider who was critical of Russian state-owned media. She considered reading such texts to be a way to occupy Russian speakers and make them feel negatively towards Latvians.

What could explain why participants mainly read the text on the education reform from a critical, mediated and referential perspective? The findings from the focus groups show that the education reform and the issue with Russian language schools in Latvia was a topic that the participants recently had noticed in the news. Several participants expressed that they were familiar

with the topic and had heard about it for years. Indeed, the education reform has been a sensitive issue and a subject of public debate in Latvia for 20 years because of worries about children's psychological well-being and proficiency in their native language as well as fear of assimilation (Cara, 2010). As such, it has been a direct part of almost their entire lives.

Just because a narrative has been circulating for a long time, however, does not necessarily make it relevant for a certain target audience. Even though they took different positions in relation to the problem itself, as will be shown in Chapter 8, these participants had learned Latvian. Participants spoke two or three languages fluently and moved between them freely. Similar to Cheskin's (2013) findings among Russian speakers in Latvia, most participants also viewed the reform positively even though they had mixed feelings about its implementation.

Zakharova's presence in the text most likely contributed to a distant reading because she represents the Russian Federation and was, by extension, associated with Russian state-controlled media, something most participants were negative towards, particularly after February 2022. As we shall see in the next section, participants interpreted the text on freedom of speech differently.

7.2 The closing of Russian channels

The text on attacking freedom of speech by banning Russian media in Latvia received mixed readings compared to the previous text on the education reform. While many participants did a transparent reading, where they assumed the text to be a direct reflection of a real external world, others did a referential reading and emphasised how the ban would affect their relatives. Most common were referential readings, where participants compared the information with their immediate life experience and their knowledge of the wider macro sphere in which the media text was produced. As will be discussed in Chapter 8, the media narrative is a great example of how participants can make critical and negative assessments of the text itself yet do a preferred reading when discussing the ban and its alignment with freedom of speech.

7.2.1 Inconsistent actors

One common theme when discussing the text on freedom of speech was the double standards applied by the Russian government. Moving between transparent and referential readings, participants compared what was written in the text with their personal experience of Russia's media censorship and treatment of oppositional media:

(Vadim, 29, Riga) Well, what can I tell you? I can only hope for important values like freedom of speech in Latvia. This is an attempt to reproach Latvia

for lacking this value. Well, of course, let's talk about the beam in the eye – censorship in Russia.

(Susanna, 23, Liepāja) How they see the speck in a person's eye and, in contrast, do not notice the beam in their own. Because let's remember what happened in Russia with foreign agents.

Both Vadim and Susanna, who were heavy users and also regularly consumed Russian media, considered Russia's attack on the Latvian government for blocking Russian media to be applying double standards regarding freedom of speech. Both censorship and the foreign agent law in Russia were mentioned when making sense of the text. While rejecting Russian actors for being hypocrites, many participants, however, still found the problem important and had a negative impression of the Latvian government. It was common among participants to start in a transparent mode and focus on the text itself and the type of channels mentioned. For example, Ofeliya said:

(Ofeliya, 19, Daugavpils) As far as I know, Bober [TV channel about home renovation] is a channel about construction. My mum likes it, she likes interior [decor]. I don't understand why banning not only news channels was necessary. (...) This works to exacerbate the conflict.

As in the case of Ofeliya, participants focused on the types of channels mentioned in the text and on entertainment content. Several gave examples of parents watching home makeover programmes on Bober or Soviet films on the Dom Kino (House of cinema) television channel. The closing of channels about construction work, music or movies was met with suspicion by participants as they were not considered propagandistic and were not connected to the news, which they thought would have been expected. For example, Vladimir and Mikhail in Riga described the banning of the channels as a mistake by the Latvian authorities because it would not contribute to anything good. Instead, it was a common perception that blocking these channels would evoke anger among the Russian-speaking audience and exacerbate the conflict, as these channels were popular among Russian speakers in Latvia. The decision to ban Dom Kino was described as absurd. Thus, while describing Russia as a hypocrite for smearing Latvia, Latvia was perceived as being overly defensive in its quest to exclude Russian channels from its media ecology, taking protective measures to an extreme. Participants also perceived the ban as more symbolic than genuinely addressing a security threat.

7.2.2 Relevance of the problem

While many participants accepted the narrative due to the inconsistency between freedom of speech and the blocking of television channels, most participants mentioned their relatives as the main reason for their position towards

the narrative. The ban negatively affected their parents and grandparents, who were active viewers of these television channels. Several participants expressed that many Russian-speaking pensioners were isolated at home during the pandemic. As an effect of the ban, their only form of entertainment was taken away, as many relatives for different reasons had not learned Latvian.

(Elena, 26, Daugavpils) This is an urgent problem for the older generation which sits in front of the TV and watches these programs. What's important to our Russian-speaking grandparents? I don't know what my grandmother's watching now, [starts laughing] I didn't ask her this question, but she was very upset.

Elena, who was a news avoider perceived the problem as highly relevant for older people who watch Russian television. The ban on Russian television channels was described as unpleasant by the participants in general. Many participants expressed negative emotions about the fact that their relatives no longer could watch their favourite channels on Russian television. For example, Elmira in Liepāja decided to teach her grandmother how to use YouTube so that she could continue to watch her favourite Russian TV shows. Many participants like Elmira talked about how they helped their grandparents use the internet to watch the same programmes on YouTube and other websites.

As such, participants discussed how the ban emotionally impacted their relatives, particularly grandparents, who were accustomed to watching Russian television daily. Banning the channels was described as disrupting their routines, which could lead to feelings of frustration and distress. Some participants also expressed concerns that older people would feel isolated or disconnected from sources of information and entertainment as few of them knew Latvian well enough. While participants agreed that younger people would switch to online sources, they acknowledged that older relatives would struggle to find alternative ways to access news. Some participants actively tried to help older relatives cope with the ban. Others saw the ban as necessary, which could lead to conflicts as older relatives saw it as censorship or an unfair restriction.

Several participants read the text in a transparent mode and considered it to be a normal article. Participants verified that what was written was true, the channels had indeed been banned in Latvia. "It's a fact, it's not a lie" as stated by Ivan in Daugavpils. "There's no freedom of speech in Latvia, everything's blocked in our country" as expressed by Nika in Daugavpils. As with the previous narrative, some participants agreed with the narrative but felt that the problem was exaggerated:

(Nikolai, 27, Daugavpils) The information they tried to convey is correct and should be conveyed to people, but how this [is done] is another thing. (...) It's a problem, but in Russian, there's this expression, "To make a mountain out of a molehill". (...) It's a problem, but it's not worth moving mountains. Well,

they cancelled it. Okay. Someone will start engaging in pirate activities and crawl the internet searching for these channels, and they will still be there. They'll still be watched.

Nikolai drew from his lifeworld experience to predict the likely outcome of the decision, likely informed by personal experiences or observations. Like many other participants he expressed scepticism toward the effectiveness of the policy discussed in the text.

7.2.3 One-sided clickbait

As with the previous narrative about education, it was common among participants who read in a mediated mode to discuss the writers' motivations of the article. One such approach was to question the facts in the text or the adequacy of any evidence given in support of a particular claim:

(Konstantin, 21, Liepāja) A one-sided presentation of the material. Only representatives from the Russian Union of Journalists of Russia and the Russian diplomatic mission of the OSCE have been chosen as experts. Only Russian experts. Why not decent, let's say, experts from other Western institutions? Words like "in a perverted form in a peculiar way interpret the concept of freedom of speech". Again, the emotional colour. If it was a neutral presentation of materials, it would be written that "in Latvia, they banned the broadcasting of so many channels. This is what experts think" (...) Here it's obvious that it comes from only one side, in order to convey only one point of view. It isn't an objective presentation.

Konstantin mentioned the text's wording and emotional colouring and requested more voices to make the text more neutral and balanced. As with the previous narrative, participants who did a mediated critical reading experienced the text as propagandistic and seeking to persuade the reader of a single point of view. Roksana and Nina described the text as one-sided, lacking balance or alternative viewpoints. Sofiya asked herself why there was no information to back up the problem in the text, while Anastasia thought the author was cherry-picking because information on why the channels were banned was left out. The ban was described as a complex phenomenon presented in overly simplistic terms.

When discussing Latvia's ban on Russian channels, participants expressed that the text was attention-grabbing regardless of the target audience. For example, Leonid described that the way the text was written played on people's emotions and curiosity:

(Leonid, 30, Daugavpils) It just attracts the eye. "Perverted" always lures people's attention to the fact that it's some perversion, something hidden. Many people want to understand what's perverted. Therefore, whether you like it or not, you will start reading this article (...). The usual clickbait. Just like on our

city media. They write articles with such loud headlines. I will read it and think, “Guys, why did you write this?” (...) This is an offensive article. It could be written somewhere in the comments section on some bad website, adding a couple more words like “Gayropa” and something like that. The article’s style fits similar words.

In this quote, Leonid reflects upon the use of the term “perversion”. Similar to the example with Zakharova, the word can trigger physical reactions. The word “perverted” is also highly emotional and carries strong moral judgement. The term is deliberately provocative and used to grab attention, creating strong feelings and a desire to click and find out the context or rationale behind the statement. Leonid also pointed out that this phenomenon of using clickbait to attract readers is something he also saw in the local media in Daugavpils.

As discussed in Chapter 6, the use of emotional language and the presence of journalists’ opinions in the text overall created suspicion towards news media among the participants. As with previous examples, however, Leonid considered the wording too strong or offensive. This type of text was not something one would expect from a news article but something that could be found in the comments section. For example, he mentioned “Gayropa”, a homophobic slur that is widely used in Russia and other post-Soviet states. The phrase portrays Europe as decaying and Russia as guaranteeing traditional values.

The choice of words is important as they drive traffic to the website and dramatise the conflict by making it seem more urgent or significant. Such emotional words divide audiences and force supporters and critics to discuss the text and engage with the content to either agree with or refute the claim. Participants paid attention to the headlines and to wording such as “running ahead of the locomotive of the European Union” (*bezhat’ vperedī parovoza Evrosojuza*):

(Marina, 24, Riga) There are a lot of big words in this article, as in the previous one. “Running ahead of the locomotive of the European Union”. Reading it gives the impression that this article is from the Sputnik portal because ... [laughs] it puts so much pressure on Latvia [laughs].

Again, participants noted the wording and the emotional nature of the text. Marina, a selective user, speculated on the source of the text based on how it was written. She expressed when discussing news media use that she sometimes compares news on different news portals such as Delfi and Sputnik and that she would close Sputnik in her browser because it was too far from her values and interests. Marina also had the impression that Sputnik usually writes very negatively about Latvia. Other participants like Ofeliya and Yelizaveta described the text as very negative towards the Latvian government and reacted to its aggressive rhetoric. Some also speculated on how the writers aimed to make readers think and feel when reading the text.

What could be possible explanations for why participants did more mixed readings of the media ban compared to the previous narrative? The findings from the focus groups suggest that even though participants were critical of the text's format, the narrative still resonated with them, and a transparent reading was common (this will be explored in more depth in Chapter 8). One explanation could be that when the interviews were conducted in Riga in the autumn of 2021, Russia had not yet invaded Ukraine. When the interviews took place in Daugavpils and Liepāja in 2022, Latvia had effectively banned all Russian TV channels registered in Russia from broadcasting in Latvia. This could be a possible explanation for why participants focused more on the phenomenon than on the text format, as it was discussed in Latvian society in a different way and to a different extent in 2022 than in 2021.

While many participants focused on the text and read it in a transparent mode, it is interesting to note what was not mentioned in the discussions. For example, none of the participants reflected on the Russian journalists' working situation in Latvia. Few participants discussed the issue in terms of an accusation of the information sphere being cleansed to eliminate undesirable points of view, as mentioned in the narrative text. There was a critique of Latvia for failing to live up to its responsibilities as an EU member and a democratic nation. Yet, instead of taking Russia's position and feeling empathy for Russian journalists, participants did not in any sense perceive Russia as a hero but told Russia to mind its own business.

One interesting finding connected to the previous chapter was that it matters what news media participants consume regularly and, more importantly, how they access this material. Since most participants access their news online and through social media, this narrative was considered less important because it had little consequences for them. Interestingly, however, while the media narrative was the most commonly pushed topic during the period studied (2019–2021), participants had little to no interest in it – despite the discussion on information war as a setting and even though Russian YouTuber Varlamov had just before the interviews released an episode about Latvia where he explicitly mentioned freedom of speech and the ban of Russian media in Latvia while discussing the situation of Russian speakers in the country.

7.3 The ban of the St George ribbon

The narrative on history revision and the ban of the St George ribbon was, compared to the other two narratives, mostly read in a close, transparent mode in which participants identified with the narrative emotionally. While some critical participants maintained a distant mediated mode, most switched to a transparent mode when discussing the text, which is an interesting finding. On the one hand, the narrative is an example of how the form influences the reading. On the other hand, the participants' close relationship with the ribbon and

how the narrative relates to their understanding of history play an important role. This finding will be analysed in depth in Chapter 8. This section will cover participants' different readings of the narrative and how they made sense of the text.

7.3.1 Agreement with the text

Most participants strongly identified with the narrative and immediately started discussing the topic and their position, which will be covered in Chapter 8. Compared to the other two narratives, much less focus was on the text. I will here show examples of transparent and referential readings:

(Nika, 19, Daugavpils) I wouldn't say there's any specific discrimination or incitement to some battle or rally. I don't know. It's just described that it's a real problem: people in World War II fought shoulder to shoulder.

(Oksana, 22, Riga) Well, I agree that they need to react somehow because it affects ... this isn't just a question about Russian speakers in Latvia, but about Russia in general. It's a slap in the face of Russia.

(Viktor, 30, Riga) I saw Maria Zakharova say that there's such a problem. Yes, Russia will send a note of protest and so forth. It makes sense because it's a revision of values, restricting people who want to wear these St George ribbons. That's it. It doesn't carry any more information, it's just that Latvia will ban St George ribbons.

Participants who read in a transparent mode took the text at face value but also moved between mediated and referential readings by comparing the text with the other texts and reflecting upon what they had noticed in the media and their perception of the event as told by relatives, in school and by others. Doing so, they concluded that yes, they fought shoulder to shoulder, and the ban was a revision of values. They perceived the text to be telling the truth, and it was accurate that Latvia had banned the St George ribbon. Several participants, like Oksana and Viktor, agreed that it was only expected that the Russian government would be protesting the ban. Thus, participants who read in a transparent mode perceived the text as directly meaningful and did not question its construction or underlying assumptions. When the audience's worldview aligns with the text, the audience is more likely to accept it as authentic or self-evident. This also happens when a text confirms pre-existing beliefs, reducing the need for critical evaluation. The text may appear natural and unproblematic if it reflects cultural norms or traditions.

7.3.2 Diverging views of the form

While a transparent reading was common, there were also mediated readings of the text. Interestingly, positive assessments were common. The text on the

ban of the St George ribbon was often compared to the other two texts in the discussions, emphasising that it was written more calmly and neutrally. The participants perceived it as more pleasant to read than the previous two:

(Feliks, 26, Riga) It seems more neutral. This is an article I would read. It would not cause any negative emotions in me. Yes, this shows the position of the Russian Federation specifically. Nevertheless, it's more or less neutral. Let's put it this way; they're still in quotation marks, and we understand that it isn't the position of the publication, but the position of Maria Zakharova.

(Vadim, 29, Riga) What's striking about this one compared to the others ... Well, I wouldn't say it's better because there are fewer flashy words, except for this quote from Zakharova. It's much drier, which is how it's usually written in news agencies. That's just a plus on my part. That's what I like better.

Assessing the text based on their criteria for news media, participants considered it to be written more calmly and more professionally. They described it as a simple statement of facts and not an opinion piece like the previous texts. Since participants did not perceive the writers to be trying to push their interpretation in a certain direction, they deemed the text readable. Zakharova was still mentioned but did not cause much discussion. As Feliks put it, her words were in quotation marks, separating her from the news media outlet. Other participants, in contrast, thought the text indeed had emotional language and presented a critique similar to that of the two previous narratives:

(Ofeliya, 19, Daugavpils) I probably won't say anything new because it's the same as the last two. This is aggression again; this is again an attempt to divert attention from the problems of one's own country. It's an attempt to create an enemy for oneself. An attempt to say how bad everyone around them is, that they forget about values.

(Anatoli, 29, Daugavpils) This text is in the repertoire of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Of course, again, we go for emotions, we see the word "fascism". I still think this is a big propaganda article.

Just like in the previous texts, Ofeliya and Anatoli noticed the same aggressive rhetoric and emotional writing. The text was perceived as another attempt to smear the Latvian government by pointing out different wrongdoings. Similarly, other participants, like Mikhail in Riga, perceived that provocations around the St George ribbon were regularly made to play with people's emotions. He perceived the text to be used for propaganda purposes. What I find interesting here, apart from how differently participants perceived the text – from being neutral and just describing how things were to being too aggressive and emotional – was the reference to fascism with its historical connotations, which triggers immediate emotions in Russian-speaking audiences. The use of the term will be explored further in the following section.

7.3.3 Exclusion of information

As with the previous narratives, participants questioned the one-sidedness of the information. For example, Valentin in Liepāja and Anastasia in Riga requested opposing views and arguments for the decision to ban the ribbon:

(Valentin, 20, Liepāja) Only the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Why is there no opinion from the European Parliament or another country?

(Anastasia, 29, Riga) They write that Latvia forbids wearing the St George ribbon. They write why it's bad and condemn it. But I don't see the [Latvian] government's argument about banning them. Those who supported them [the ribbons], how do they feel about it? It's just that the locals also condemned it. How? What are the arguments? (...) I didn't like the phrase "revise history and challenge the results of World War II". I don't think anyone disputes the outcome. (...) I also don't like the position of an elder brother in this article and in the others.

Participants questioned the lack of information in the text and requested arguments for why the ribbon was banned. Anastasia also asked for examples of opinions related to the decision and rejected the rhetoric, stating that it was that of an elder brother. In this example, Anastasia moved between a mediated and a referential mode of reception, where she questioned the form and the accuracy of the information while comparing it to her perception of reality and the importance of the symbol for Russian speakers in Latvia. Other participants wondered whether the exclusion of information was a strategy. For example, Leonid commented that the text strategically left out the fact that Nazi symbols also had been banned in Latvia:

(Leonid, 30, Daugavpils) As far as I remember, a bill was passed to ban Nazi and Soviet symbols. In this case, it's very important; it turns out that there's a tuning of the reader, especially here, the deputies of the national bloc immediately developed Nazism. In your head, all this spins together, and then the person who reads such a thing at once thinks, "So they banned the St George ribbon, the national bloc in Latvia proposed Nazism, so the Nazis did it. So, we probably walk around with swastikas". It's the logical conclusion for someone who knows nothing about Latvia and relies on information from the Russian media. (...) If you watch the news of the Russian media, these are the same claims with which the Russian troops found war with Ukraine. It's also possible to do the same with Latvia.

Similar to the education reform where Russian speakers would be rescued by Russian authorities, Leonid commented that the text could be used to describe everyone in Latvia as fascists. He also drew parallels to how Russian media portrayed Ukraine. The history narrative was one of the few examples where participants compared what was written with other mediated stories about the topic in the news media. Just as Leonid mentioned fascism, other participants

stated that they were tired of how Russia used the word fascist as a term for anyone who opposed Russia:

(Susanna, 23, Liepāja) Many words like fascists ... Let's say that it's incorrect to call nationalists fascists. After all, fascism is a slightly different epithet. (...) To declare any opponent to Russia to be a fascist; I'm sick of it. I'm tired of it because those who fight against Russians are not always fascists; they are nationalists.

References to fascism are an important part of Russia's strategic narratives because for Russian speakers, it is closely associated with victory over Nazi Germany in World War II. It is a term that often stirs emotions, particularly in a Russian-speaking context. One such example was a discussion in a focus group in Daugavpils, where two participants discussed how one participant since the invasion of Ukraine was called a Nazi, simply because he was not 'for Putin' or for Russia. Another participant added that it was common for Russian speakers to be called both a Nazi and an occupier on 9 May in Latvia. When discussing the text, they described being called Nazis by people in their surroundings simply for opposing Russia as Russian speakers in Latvia. The example of the history narrative highlights how strategic narratives about historical memory can polarise personal identities and allegiances, creating an 'us versus them' thinking and forcing individuals into rigid categories that do not align with their complex identities and perceptions of the world. The example of being labelled both a Nazi and an occupier also showcases how history is weaponised in this context.

7.4 Discussion

Participants' different readings of the texts on the denotative level of reception had both similarities and differences. Participants moved between transparent, referential and mediated modes of reception when discussing the texts.

Mediated readings were the most common among participants. In a mediated mode, many participants discussed the intentions and motivations of the writers of the texts. Some participants speculated whom the texts were written for. They concluded that they seemed to be written for a Russian-speaking audience in Russia to show how bad everything was in Latvia and how Russian speakers were discriminated against there. Other participants thought the texts were aimed at an older generation of Russian speakers and that they could influence their relatives. All three texts were described as one-sided, presenting only parts of the problem and few facts and references to other sources. Several participants also perceived that the texts were constructed in a way that, for distinct reasons, generated clicks and created emotions of anger and distress in the reader. Especially the first two texts were described as very

emotional, making the reader want to light torches and take them to the streets and protest. Journalistic features were also scrutinised, as participants stated the texts were closer to opinion pieces, pushing the reader in a certain direction. Reading the headline made it clear what one was supposed to think of the narrative text.

Selective users were overall critical and mainly read in a mediated mode. These participants usually had high expectations of a media text and assessed it according to their journalistic standards. Those participants often said they would not have opened and read such an article if it had appeared in their newsfeed online. Selective users consumed less Russian media and more Latvian public service media. As such, they were probably more open to Latvian interpretations of history and their relationship to the St George ribbon was less emotional, which did not trigger identification as easily.

Referential readings were typical when comparing the text with personal experiences, making positive or negative assessments. Referential readings were common among heavy users, who generally moved between referential and mediated readings and compared what was written with journalistic standards and other mediated stories on the topic as well as what they knew from wider society. Participants seldom started in a referential mode but rather focused on mediated or transparent readings of the text.

Transparent readings were not that common among participants. Those who read in a transparent reception mode were emotionally engaged with the text and experienced strong feelings of identification with the actors or textual themes. They found that yes, this was indeed about them, and yes, this was indeed discrimination of Russian speakers in Latvia. Importantly, reading in a transparent mode also meant that the participant relied on the text as a primary resource for decoding rather than drawing on contextual information. There is a risk that emotional content limits our ability to critically deconstruct or think about a text. Michelle (2007, p. 198) writes that a transparent reading mode is well documented within existing research. This mode should be acknowledged and more adequately understood when strategically addressing its political implications. If audiences identify with a text, they are more likely to do a close, less critical reading.

News avoiders, with little interest in following the news, tended to do transparent readings. It should be added, however, that participants to varying extents read in a transparent mode regardless of their news media repertoires. The transparent mode was, however, used seldom or for a short amount of time.

Most participants were algorithmic users and did different readings of the narratives depending on their level of interest in the topic. These participants usually kept a lower profile in the focus groups, siding with and complementing other participants' statements in their readings. Most participants predominantly did a mediated reading of the education reform, a referential reading of the media ban and a transparent reading of the ban of the St George ribbon.

Different readings reflect varying levels of involvement in and distance from the narrative texts and varying degrees of attunement to their form. Contrary to earlier studies (Szostek 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2018; Archetti 2015), the findings suggest that direct and indirect personal experiences does not necessarily lead to a closer reading of the text. The format of the text also to some extent influences participants' perception of news media in general and Russian media in particular. The activation of emotions, however, leads to both close and distant readings of the text, depending on the participant's previous relationship to the topic. The findings also suggest that emotional identification leads to transparent readings while emotional language does not.

Personal experiences of the topic presented in a story may induce an intense mode of processing, which may be strengthened by transportation (Bilandzic, 2006). This could be one reason why participants identified with the narratives. Narratives that activate an audience's collective emotions can also lead to identification (Ahmed, 2004b). However, participants reacted negatively to the aggressive rhetoric on the education reform and the ban of media channels. They also perceived Zakharova negatively, an actor that had become imbued with affect (Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2019).

From a reception theory perspective, the findings suggest that certain actors could influence the mode of reception. A controversial person like Zakharova could trigger a mediated mode of reception and lead the reader to become more critical and distant towards the text than they would be if the text had been more neutrally written or did not cite such controversial persons. As such, this study reinforces the argument made by Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) that distraction threatens narrative engagement.

The use of controversial language could also be one of the reasons why participants did a mediated reading of the text, especially when considering that the participants described when discussing their news media use that they assessed information based on how it was written. When emotional wordings were used, this was interpreted as an attempt to move the reader in a certain direction. In contrast to prior research (Wagnsson & Lundström, 2023), this study does suggest that the form indeed influences narrative persuasion. The combination of emotional language, exaggerated problems and one-sidedness led participants to label texts as propagandistic and manipulative. As such, the texts were also not in line with what participants would expect from a neutral news article, which pushed them into a mediated mode of reception.

Finally, when doing referential or mediated readings, participants must first consider the text as life to evaluate its similarity to life as they understand it. A mediated mode may interrupt identification with the narrative text and potentially undermine the text's ideological effectivity. This is perhaps one reason why participants did a transparent reading of the history narrative, as it was also written according to their news preferences. When it comes to persuasion, this means that emotional identification rather than emotional language increases the chances for narratives to be persuasive.

This makes them less likely to be read in a mediated, critical and distant reception mode. Clear and simple language makes it easier for an audience to understand and relate to the narrative, perhaps even more so in a polarised media ecology where an audience suffers from news fatigue and is regularly exposed to emotional language.

Concluding remarks

By exploring denotative levels of meaning, this chapter has shown how young Russian speakers make sense of the strategic narratives projected in Sputnik Latvia. Using Michelle's (2007) reception model, the chapter focused on transparent, referential and mediated readings of the texts and how affect and emotions push readers between different modes of reception. Most participants predominantly did a mediated reading of the education reform, a referential reading of the media ban and a transparent reading of the ban of the St George ribbon. Different readings reflect varying degrees of involvement in and distance from media texts and varying degrees of attunement to their form. Narratives that activate collective emotions lead to identification. Emotional language, however, does not, and it can push the reader to do a distant reading. Connotative levels of reception will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 8.

8 Taking positions through discursive readings

By exploring denotative levels of meaning, the previous chapter showed how young Russian speakers make sense of the strategic narratives projected in Sputnik Latvia. Using Michelle's (2007) reception model, the chapter focused on transparent, referential and mediated readings of the texts and how affect and emotions push readers between different modes of reception.

In this chapter, the reception analysis is taken one step further by shifting focus to connotative levels of meaning. Participants' analytical discursive readings and their positions when approaching these narratives as messages is explored. As such, the focus is on how the strategic narratives projected in Sputnik Latvia are retold by the participants and how they position themselves in relation to the ideological messages. As in the previous chapter, affect and emotion are taken into consideration when discussing participants' position-taking. Depending on the extent of their emotional connection to the narrative in question, participants will be more likely to either do a dominant preferred reading of the narrative and accept its ideological message or do an oppositional reading and reject the message.

The chapter follows a case-by-case structure: the sections on the removal of Russian language education, the closing of Russian channels and the ban of the St George ribbon follow a similar pattern in which participants' comprehension of the narrative message and their response to it are analysed in terms of different positions taken by the participants. The chapter ends with an overall discussion of participants' position-taking when discussing the texts and the role of affect in this process.

8.1 The removal of Russian language education

The text on the "forced assimilation" and discrimination of Russian speakers in Latvia due to the education reform rendered vivid discussions in the focus groups. Most participants had gone to Russian minority schools and had personal experience of the education reform. Yet, despite their shared experience and agreement on implementing the reform, participants took different positions regarding their analytical reading of the narrative.

8.1.1 Oppositional reading – we should know Latvian

Surprisingly, despite having personal experience of the narrative and the education reform, most participants opposed the Russian strategic narrative. They opposed the narrative of Latvian authorities infringing on their rights to receive education in their native language. Instead, most participants described that since they lived in Latvia, it was only natural for them to study in the state language. Many participants expressed that they thought it was to be expected that a country wants everyone to study in the same language.

Most participants had gone to Russian minority schools in Riga, Daugavpils and Liepāja and had similar experiences of the transition from Russian to Latvian. Participants described the transition as not ideal. For example, Viktor, Fyodor and Mikhail in Riga explained how the textbooks were in Latvian but the lessons were conducted in Russian. Susanna and Ulyana in Liepāja also experienced how the teachers were not that strict and did not pay attention to grammatical mistakes in Latvian. The participants who went to Russian schools explained that the Latvian language did not have a high status and that the schools had problems with recruiting Latvian-speaking teachers.

If the participants had mixed feelings and sometimes negative experiences of the implementation of the reform, how come they opposed the Russian narrative of infringement? As shown in the previous chapter, they perceived this narrative as manipulative in its form, and many participants also perceived the problem to be exaggerated. The reform had been discussed over the past 20 years and was not seen as relevant to them. Instead, many participants saw other problems as more important. One such problem was that they had issues with not knowing the Latvian language well enough as adults:

(Yelizaveta, 30, Liepāja) After all, we live in Latvia. It will be easier to go to university and study in Latvian. It was very difficult for me. I eventually had to go to [Name of University] because it was still possible to study in Russian there. At that moment, I understood: Damn, if I knew Latvian, I would go to Riga, to some normal university and study. This restricts us; why should we limit ourselves?

(Ivan, 28, Daugavpils) As a Russian speaker, I can also experience this discrimination. I'm disgusted. I would even like to see this discrimination more active. At school, I didn't learn Latvian well because there were no people around me with whom I could speak Latvian. When I entered the university, the state education was only in Latvian, and at first, it was even difficult for me to understand anything.

Yelizaveta and Ivan expressed how they struggled as university students when they realised that they lacked the necessary language skills to progress in their studies. It was a shock for some participants to enter a university where everything was in Latvian. Not knowing Latvian well was in itself described as discrimination. As such, the reform was perceived as correct and would

ultimately lead to less discrimination of Russian speakers in Latvia. While other participants did not struggle and expressed that they spoke Latvian fluently after having gone to Russian schools, they also noticed that a significant part of the population still did not know or did not want to learn Latvian. As a result, many participants who did an oppositional reading stated that the education reform would bring a solution to this experienced discrimination.

For example, Konstantin, a heavy user who considered the narrative text one-sided, stated similarly to Yelizaveta and Ivan that Russian speakers were disadvantaged because it was more challenging to enter Latvian universities. If Russian speakers know Latvian, they will be on equal terms with Latvian speakers. Participants mentioned their younger siblings being more fluent in Latvian than they were at the same age. Some participants wished they had been sent to a Latvian school as children. For example, Klara in Riga said:

(Klara, 25, Riga) I think it's the right thing to teach children to speak Latvian from the very first grade, even from preschool. [My parents] wanted to send me to a Latvian preschool. My father wanted to send me to a Latvian one, but my mother wanted to send me to a Russian one. That's why I was sent to a Russian [preschool]. I would probably have preferred to study in a Latvian school and a Latvian preschool.

Like the other participants, Klara reflected upon her language skills as a result of having attended a Russian school. Her opinion was that Russian schools should be closed because she experienced that many people suffered from not knowing the Latvian language well enough. Her story is an example of how parents might disagree about the choice of education. One parent might prioritise integration into Latvian society while the other prioritises cultural preservation. The participants discussed how the education reform would benefit Russian-speaking children rather than discriminate against them. Most participants who expressed an oppositional position did not feel discriminated by the reform but hoped for a better future for their younger siblings and their children.

Participants perceived more pressing problems, such as not knowing the Latvian language well enough or observing that many people in Latvia still do not know the state language, which they perceived as a problem for their integration. Even though these participants had somewhat negative experiences of the education reform and the change from Russian to Latvian during their studies, they were overall positive towards transferring the education system into Latvian. Participants narrated the reform as an advantage for Russian speakers and an expected positive development of Latvian society.

While shown in Chapter 7 that many participants read this narrative in a critical, mediated mode, what could be possible explanations for why they opposed the Russian strategic narrative? As already mentioned, one is their experience of the strategic narrative as too emotional and exaggerating the

problem, resulting in participants rejecting the narrative. Another is that they did not perceive the problem as important to them. People would still be able to speak Russian, and the Russian language would still be studied in school. Some participants explained that this problem is more important for the older generation. Mikhail in Riga, for example, described that this story would worry his parents, who had a different perception of the education reform. Young Russian speakers, on the other hand, were less worried. They have been exposed to the Latvian language from a young age and are likely to learn it more easily than their parents and older relatives.

Young Russian speakers also have strong social and economic incentives to learn Latvian. As such, the participants tend to perceive the reform as a practical issue. As noted by Papacharissi (2014, p. 134), emotion and logic are not endpoints of a continuum but coexist and work together. Logic helps interpret emotions, and emotions give meaning to logic. This example shows that despite having a negative experience and emotional memories of the education reform, participants still adopted a pragmatic approach and understood that the reform would be beneficial in the long run.

8.1.2 Dominant reading – infringement of education rights

Few participants fully agreed with the Russian strategic narrative. Those who did a dominant reading expressed that it was wrong to terminate the bilingual education system and effectively shut down Russian minority schools in Latvia. These participants stressed that forcing Russian speakers to study in Latvian was discriminatory because it eliminated the possibility of studying in their native language. For example, Darya in Daugavpils stated the following during the focus group:

(Darya, 24, Daugavpils) I liked this article. I like what they say here about what I'm already used to. In school, we were told that everything would be more in Latvian. At first, we had bilingual, then non-bilingual, but I didn't like it very much in my heart. I had a very negative attitude towards it. "Why do I have to study in Latvian? Why am I supposed to do this?"

This narrative resonated with Darya emotionally and confirmed her experience. She also expressed in the focus group that she had never experienced a situation in Latvia where a Latvian-speaking person could not switch to Russian in a discussion. Having grown up and studied in Daugavpils, a city with a majority of Russian speakers, most probably contributed to the feeling of not having to learn Latvian. For example, Polina, who was originally from Daugavpils but had moved to Riga, expressed a similar opinion:

(Polina, 21, Riga) I was born in Latvia. I'm a full-fledged citizen of Latvia. It's not my fault that I was born into a Russian-speaking family. My entire environment is Russian. I live in a Russian city, and [I] went to a Russian

school. Then, in an instant, everything clicked in the government. “Let’s do everything in Latvian.” (...) It seems to me that this is an infringement of rights. (...) In Switzerland, there are four official languages. Switzerland is a small country divided into French and Italian parts. You go to the Italian part, and all the signs on the shops are in Italian. You go to Geneva, and everything’s in French. So, what’s the problem?

While Darya felt negative about the reform, Polina described feelings of infringement and being treated differently than Latvian speakers in Latvia for having grown up in a Russian-speaking environment. Participants like Polina, who accepted the narrative, often mentioned other European nations like Switzerland as a multilingual nation with more than one official language. For example, Yelizaveta in Liepāja, who opposed the Russian narrative, also compared other countries where several languages coexist peacefully. There was also a discussion in Polina’s focus group where participants debated whether Russian should have been a second state language (see the chapter on context). Oksana had heard that if Russian became a second state language, the Latvian language would disappear. She expressed genuine confusion as there were smaller countries than Latvia where languages had coexisted for centuries. For Isak and Sofia, in the same group, it was more about the state’s attitude towards its people.

Besides experiencing an infringement of their rights, several participants considered Russian a more useful language than Latvian. For example, many jobs require knowledge of Latvian, English and Russian when applying. Latvia was described as a small country, and participants in Riga, Daugavpils and Liepāja noted that they used their Russian language skills more than their Latvian language skills in the workplace. Some participants expressed suspicion about the motivations behind the reform. For example, Emiliya in Riga said:

(Emiliya, 24, Riga) I don’t believe it when they [the Latvian government] say this is to help children. I believe that there’s another problem. When an employer requires the Russian language for a service staff position. Many students who come to Riga from small towns have problems because they don’t know Russian. They [employers] don’t take them, and they [the students], of course, aren’t happy with all this. Accordingly, you don’t know what the closure is really about. Not closing, but the reform to transfer to Latvian.

Emiliya, who had gone to a Russian school and had learned Latvian fluently herself, was suspicious of the real motivations behind the education reform. She later stated in the follow-up interview that when taking into account that 30 to 40 per cent of Latvia’s population is Russian-speaking and that children should have access and opportunity to study in their native language, then the reform is discrimination. She added that it is better to study in Latvian because it will be easier for children, but clarified that she thought so from a practical point of view. This opinion was common in focus groups. Participants understand that Latvian is the state language and children will be better off if they

learn it from the very beginning, but the narrative of discrimination still resonates with them.

While some participants thought the reform was discriminatory, most of those who agreed with the narrative did so because people were taken away their possibility to choose in what language they would study. This reasoning also connects with ideas of wanting to be able to wear whatever symbol they like or be able to decide for themselves what media to consume. Besides losing choices and feeling a lack of self-determination, these participants also felt they were advantaged by knowing Latvian and Russian fluently. The strategic narrative most probably resonated with these participants because it coincided with feelings of discrimination and not belonging, of being the ‘other’ in Latvian society – a perception that is reinforced through media, politics and everyday encounters. This perception was shared by Konstantin, Emiliya and other participants who feared that Russian schools would remain after the transition. As stated by Emiliya, “Everyone there speaks Latvian only when the inspector comes. Nothing has changed.”

The narrative may resonate with young Russian speakers who have not necessarily had a negative experience of the education reform itself but felt that it was discrimination from the beginning to take away from Russian speakers the opportunity to study in their native language. While most participants accept that the reform has been implemented gradually for the past 20 years, it does not mean that they are emotionally indifferent or think it is a correct decision.

8.1.3 Negotiated reading – both languages should coexist

Some participants took a negotiated position and saw equally positive and negative sides to the education reform. They accepted some parts of the narrative while rejecting other aspects, drawing on different assumptions and discourses. On the one hand, they thought that they lived in Latvia and, therefore, education should be provided in Latvian. On the other hand, they stressed that a large part of the population speaks Russian as a first language and that these changes would create emotional stress for Russian-speaking children who abruptly had to change from Russian to Latvian in school. For example, Valentin in Liepāja explained:

(Valentin, 20, Liepāja) In my opinion, the education system has positive and negative sides. For example, the positive side is that we live in Latvia, after all. We have our state language and universal belief; all state institutions should be in the state language, including schools. But since there are about 40 per cent Russian speakers in Latvia, I still don’t think that a drastic change in the education system has a good effect on Russian-speaking children. (...) I imagine it as some emotional and psychological stress and pressure when the Russian education abruptly changes to Latvian. It could have been done even more

gradually so that the child would gradually get used to the system and the new educational reform.

Valentin was one of the few participants in this study who had gone to a Latvian school, and, as such, he had no direct personal experience of going to a Russian minority school. He emphasised that he could understand how the shift would be stressful for Russian-speaking children. The opinion that the reform could have been conducted even more gradually was also voiced by other participants like Yelizaveta and Ulyana and is an interesting finding. More importantly, it is connected with critique towards the implementation of the reform where participants expressed that it would be better if the children studied in Latvian from the very beginning. This is a bit of a paradox because the transformation had indeed been gradual, and following 2022, the education system was going to be entirely in Latvian, meaning that children would study in Latvian from the beginning, which is precisely what the participants raised as a critique. While they might agree with the reform's goal that everyone in Latvia should learn Latvian, they simultaneously expressed hesitation or discomfort about the pace of implementation. This dissonance may arise from conflicting internal values of wanting to support integration while empathising with the challenges faced by Russian speakers in Latvia.

Participants who took a negotiated position also often underlined the advantages of Russian schools, or bilingual schools as they often were called. For example, Nadezhda in Riga was happy with the old system:

(Nadezhda, 24, Riga) I like bilingual education because you learn two languages. I like that you draw from different cultures. Through Russian schools, there's a lot of knowledge about Russian culture, Latvian literature and so on. (...) Now, there will be only one. It seems to me that this is our strong point; there are different cultures, and you speak two languages fluently. (...) People should have a choice. But at the same time, I also don't support the idea that everything should be completely in Russian.

According to Nadezhda, having bilingual education was an advantage. In the focus group, she added that Latvia was a small country and that Russia was an important business partner. Bringing to mind Darya and Emiliya's comments about work descriptions requiring three languages, Nadezhda thought that knowing several languages was an important skill and one of the strengths of Russian speakers in Latvia. Some participants expressed ambivalent feelings regarding the education reform and how to respond to the narrative. For example, Oksana expressed complex feelings regarding the education reform:

(Oksana, 22, Riga) I don't know how to feel about it. I believe that it's necessary to raise the level of the Latvian language in the country. Because, indeed, many people either don't know it or don't want to learn it. But on the other hand ... I don't know. I have a very ambivalent feeling.

What Oksana expressed was common, and participants regardless of position thought it necessary to raise the level of the Latvian language in the country. They were not certain, however, how this change should be implemented. Regardless of position, participants also considered it a domestic problem for Latvia and that the Russian Federation should mind its own business. Most probably, participants did a negotiated reading of this narrative because of conflicting feelings between emotion and logic. On the one hand, they could logically understand that more people need to know the state language and that it would be beneficial to know Latvian. On the other hand, they could have negative emotions towards the reform itself and towards its implementation.

Since language has been constructed as a key marker for national belonging in Latvia (see chapter on context), the shift to Latvian education can create emotions of not being fully accepted by Latvian society. This exclusion occurs because language is not only an instrument for teaching but also a powerful symbol of identity. By promoting Latvian as a sole language, the reform may be seen as prioritising Latvian over Russian, leading to resentment or sadness as young Russian speakers may feel that their linguistic heritage is being marginalised or erased from the education system.

The youngest participants who experienced discomfort, such as the high school students in Liepāja, did so also because of anxiety about their academic performance. Participants felt disadvantaged because they were required to take tests in a language they were not fluent in, which could affect their grades and chances of getting into a university programme. Some also expressed that they struggled with homework because they came from a Russian-speaking family and had little language support from family members.

Young Russian speakers may experience a heightened sense of exclusion because they not only are dealing with the discomfort of having to change from Russian to Latvian and worrying about getting a degree in higher education but also simultaneously absorbing the collective emotions of the community and family. Using Ahmed's (2004b) notion of stickiness, where emotions attach to bodies across generations, young Russian speakers may struggle with fully embracing the Latvian language without feeling like they are abandoning their Russian culture.

8.2 The closing of Russian channels

The narrative on the infringement of freedom of speech and the blocking of Russian television channels in Latvia did not concern the participants as much as the other two narratives. Participants did not consider themselves personally affected by this problem and at first rendered it irrelevant. Furthermore, many participants described it as a complex problem. Overall, the narrative was considered incoherent, probably due to Russia's handling of oppositional

media and propagandistic state-controlled media, of which participants had a bad impression. Most participants, however, based their readings on moral principles.

8.2.1 Dominant reading – infringement of freedom of speech

Most participants, including those in favour of the Latvian education reform, agreed with the strategic narrative that it was wrong to block Russian TV channels in Latvia. The reasons why it was considered wrong differed among participants. For some, it was a matter of principle; it was considered negative to ban something in general, and citizens should not be told by the state what to read or watch. For example, Valentin based his dominant reading upon his experience of living in a democratic country with freedom of speech:

(Valentin, 20, Liepāja) I haven't watched Russian channels lately, but I still think this is a restriction of freedom of choice and speech. We live in a free and democratic country, and the government has no right to decide for us and tell us that we can't watch these channels.

For some participants, the act of banning Russian media was symbolic and triggered feelings of discomfort. Despite not watching Russian state-controlled television themselves, participants voiced that they had the right to decide what media to consume; they considered the decision to ban Russian media to restrict the free dissemination of information. For example, Viktor was a heavy consumer of Russian media and questioned why he was not allowed to find out the official Russian position:

(Viktor, 30, Riga) Here are the words of the journalist Timur Shafir that this is a restriction of freedom of speech, and so on. Indeed, this is a restriction on the dissemination of information. If we ban Russian media, then how can we get an official position from Russia? Why not just create your [own Russian] alternative for your position?

As voiced by Viktor, participants may also feel that their access to alternative viewpoints becomes limited. Feliks, who was a heavy user and supported the education reform but questioned the media ban, said:

(Feliks, 26, Riga) I believe there's a problem in Latvia because there's no Russian media on television now. It's one thing for schools where I agree that, yes, perhaps the reform was not carried out in the most successful way, because many had to change their education after the 7th grade. But, on the whole, the reform is good. But when we talk about television broadcasting or internet broadcasting, one way or another, a certain number of Russian-speaking people live here, and they have the right to receive information in their preferred language.

While Feliks approved the education reform and rejected the Russian narrative, he disagreed with the decision to block Russian media channels. He perceived it to be against Russian speakers' right to access information in their native language. There were discussions of the political nature of the decision to block Russian media channels. This topic was raised especially during 2022, when more Russian websites were blocked in Latvia following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For example, in the follow-up interview Emiliya stated:

(Emiliya, 24, Riga) They [Latvian authorities] put a lot of pressure on sanctions back then. I don't think it had anything to do with any sanctions. Latvian politicians who are considered to be ardent nationalists and have never liked Russia but have always hated it took advantage of all this. All their lives, they have been singing a song about the need to demolish the monument, about the fact that all Russians here should learn Latvian and so on.

As we saw with the education narrative, Emiliya was suspicious of the real motives behind the media ban. Her impression was that the Latvian government had been wanting to block Russian media for a long time. Following the war, they took the advantage to reduce the Russian influence in Latvian society by blocking Russian media, demolishing Soviet monuments and speeding up the language transition in Latvian schools. Other participants spontaneously replicated Russian strategic narratives stating that the ban was a way for Latvian authorities to get rid of the competition in the media market. Participants who did a dominant reading described the ban as a "stupid" and "thoughtless" political decision. By calling the decision political, participants expressed distrust towards the Latvian government and its motives. They felt that the government was using national security as a pretext to limit Russian language media.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Emiliya, Mikhail and Vladimir thought it was a mistake of the Latvian government to ban the channels, as it would only lead to hatred against the Latvian authorities among Russian speakers. Ofeliya, whose family watched a lot of Russian television, expressed that viewers of Russian television only would perceive Latvian authorities as enemies who are banning their channels and their language, which is also a popular narrative in Russian media. Ofeliya questioned why they could not have banned just the news channels. Participants also thought that banning Russian media would have the opposite effect, as people would be more inclined to watch them. For example, when discussing with Vera and Anton, Nina in Daugavpils expressed that the ban would trigger people who watched propagandistic state-controlled media to believe it even more after the ban.

Participants who accepted the narrative felt that Latvian authorities acted too harshly. Participants most likely perceived this narrative in the context

of broader geopolitical tensions between Latvia and Russia, particularly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. While the ban did not affect young Russian speakers directly, they still might feel targeted by the policies, which might intensify feelings of not belonging. As voiced by participants, particularly in Liepāja, they felt that the ban on Russian media was part of a wider trend to crackdown on the Russian language and culture in Latvia.

The perception of feeling unfairly targeted by the Latvian state policies can also add to an emotional reading of the strategic narrative. Such a narrative may resonate during rapid societal changes when people experience an increased threat to their cultural identity. The reaction to this narrative may also be understood as being connected to deeper layers of affective meaning that go beyond media consumption. By opposing the ban, they participate in a collective emotional response, reinforcing their sense of belonging to a group threatened by Latvian state policies.

8.2.2 Negotiated reading – it does not affect me

Most participants initially stated that they could not care less about this problem since they did not watch television and stressed that it was irrelevant for young people. While most participants did a dominant reading, several took a negotiated position as they neither accepted nor rejected the Russian strategic narrative:

(Svetlana, 25, Riga) Yes, they closed some channels. I don't know. I can't say anything honestly about this topic. (...) It didn't concern me in any way.

(Nadezhda, 24, Riga) Young people, I think we don't care. We know everything from the internet; we don't watch TV.

Svetlana and Nadezhda's comments were typical for many participants. Several participants mentioned that it was the first time they noticed channels such as those mentioned in the text. Many of them perceived the problem as non-relevant, and the reception process probably would have stopped there if discussion had not been encouraged. Some participants expressed ambivalent feelings about the ban and had difficulties taking a position:

(Inessa, 21, Daugavpils) I don't know if it's right, if it's wrong. It's very, very controversial.

(Vadim, 29, Riga) It's difficult to say whether it's reasonable because it's a geopolitical decision. When that decision is made, we don't know the whole truth.

Participants' indecision as to what to think about the ban probably also had to do with the situation being considered complex. It was common to compare

Latvia and Russia, with everyone understanding that there was strict censorship in Russia: “it’s not a secret to anyone”, as stated by Varya. Since Latvia is a democratic country, however, it should not have to rely on censorship, they reasoned. Other participants reflected upon how a democratic country like Latvia should act in such a situation. For example, Anton said:

(Anton, 29, Daugavpils) On the one hand, I agree that the closure of Russian channels doesn’t apply freely. There was a question of how to act in this situation when such language of aggression, anger and hatred comes from Russian channels. It’s such a moral and ethical question. It seems to me that acting in such a situation is difficult.

Anton, who was a selective user, found the situation challenging. For him, it was a complicated decision to ban any media out of principle. He understood the motivation behind doing so because of the hate speech that was common among Russian state-controlled television channels. The ambivalence experienced by Anton was also shared by other participants, who felt it was a simple solution to a complex problem. Like participants who did a dominant reading of the narrative, participants who took a negotiated position thought that the ban would not be effective because it would not change people’s opinions. “Why bother and waste time on some more complex solutions when you can push the button?” Vadim asked, who perceived the ban as an attempt by the Latvian government to influence the opinions of Russian speakers.

Participants who took a negotiated position may have felt disconnected from the issue and saw it as irrelevant to their everyday lives, especially since most participants did not watch TV and got their news from social media. As such, they might have felt that the debate about Russian media was outdated and perceived the ban as another political decision that had no impact on their personal life. Others could see both sides of the argument but felt it would not affect them enough to take a position. These participants may also not feel strongly attached to Latvian or Russian-speaking communities. Finally, information fatigue may also have played a role, especially since the problem was perceived as complex, so participants might have refused to engage.

8.2.3 Oppositional reading – Russian TV is propagandistic

Surprisingly few participants disagreed with the narrative and supported the ban on Russian television. Those who did stated that even though they could navigate the information space themselves, they acknowledged that parts of the population in Latvia received their information from Russian state-controlled media and perceived all of it as truth. Compared to dominant readers, participants who did an oppositional reading considered freedom of speech a utopia. For example, Anastasia and Konstantin described the ban as necessary to protect Latvia’s democracy:

(Anastasia, 29, Riga) Democracy has protection mechanisms, and if there are such things as disinformation (...), democracy must be defended in this way. It's already becoming not just a single case, but a system [of disinformation].

(Konstantin, 21, Liepāja) Sputnik and other media outlets were broadcast in Latvia. I followed [the discussion] and I understand. They were temporarily blocked before, for example, because someone said that it was necessary to drop a nuclear bomb on Riga. (...) It was broadcast in Latvia on these TV channels. People watch it. [Vladimir] Solovyov's there, he's a Russian propagandist. They were constantly talking on the air about the Nazis in Latvia. It was shown in Latvia; people watched it and were affected by this influence.

Anastasia, Konstantin and other participants who took an oppositional position rejected the narrative based on the assessment that such Russian media was considered a threat to national security and democracy. In doing so, they rejected the problem as being concerned with the Russian language. By opposing the narrative, they may also perceive that Russian media represents a negative influence, especially in the context of Russian propaganda and disinformation. Supporting the ban may thus evoke feelings of patriotism and loyalty to Latvia.

Participants who opposed the narrative also expressed that plenty of other Russian information sources were not banned. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Latvia welcomed hundreds of Russian journalists and oppositional media. Anastasia and Konstantin discussed what many participants who took a negotiated position also discussed, namely how democracy could and should be protected during war. They recognised the harmful and polarising effects of Russian media as a foundation for their position-taking. Those participants also expressed frustration with being connected with the Russian Federation because of their native language. Instead, they felt more closely aligned with Latvian values and integrated into Latvian society.

Several participants also drew parallels to Russia, stating it was amusing that Russia was smearing Latvia regarding freedom of speech. Russia was, as mentioned in Chapter 7, described as hypocritical. "People who live in glass houses should not throw stones" was a common statement in all cities, especially since every other person in Russia now would be considered a foreign agent:

(Liza, 22, Daugavpils) Part of this article seems to be a personal reason to divide society.

(Yaroslav, 19, Daugavpils) Yes. These Latvians are against Russians; they have blocked again, and they don't give freedom to speak. Well, the kind of words that they broadcast, too.

(Inessa, 21, Daugavpils) By the way, you can write the same about Russia about blocking.

(Liza, 22, Daugavpils) Almost everyone there is now becoming a foreign agent.

(Yaroslav, 19, Daugavpils) Every second.

(Liza, 22, Daugavpils) Every second, yes.

Liza, Yaroslav and Inessa had different news media repertoires but agreed on the double standard shown by the Russian narrative. As described in the previous chapter, participants perceived Russia to be hypocritical when trying to smear Latvia for lacking freedom of speech while Russia itself practised strong censorship. “Russia’s not going to talk to us about freedom of speech”, Anatoli and Ofeliya ironically stated in Daugavpils. If dominant readers accepted the narrative because of the principles of freedom of speech, oppositional readers rejected the narrative due to its inconsistency. Blaming others for something that you are guilty of yourself did not resonate with these participants.

The discussions in Daugavpils and Liepāja were most probably also affected by Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, where the foreign agent law was accompanied by war censorship laws and fake news laws that effectively caused the termination of independent Russian media in Russia. In their discussions, they also compared Latvia to Russia and commented that Latvia should behave better than Russia because it is a democratic country and a member of the European Union. The ban, however, was still considered reasonable and necessary by participants.

8.3 The ban of the St George ribbon

The narrative on history revision and the ban of the St George ribbon was considered by participants to be the most neutral text in how it was written. Yet, the narrative message itself was perceived as the loudest and described as a sensitive and painful topic by most participants. It was especially felt after the prohibition of the 9 May celebrations in Latvia in 2022 following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The removal of the Victory monument in Riga, together with Soviet memorials all around Latvia the same year, was also part of the participants’ discussions.

Most participants perceived the narrative message as logical and coherent. Of course Russia was upset with the fact that Latvia had banned the main symbol for victory and, by doing so, tried to distort the memory of World War II. Participants who took an oppositional position questioned the message, as the symbol had been distorted beyond recognition following the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the militarisation of the 9 May celebrations. Regardless of position, participants were frustrated that the symbol and the day

were used to create tensions in Latvian society and to pit Latvian and Russian speakers against each other.

While participants reacted to the emotional language of the two previous texts, the narrative on the St George ribbon was considered more neutral in its form. Yet, its message activated participants' emotions and associations with the symbol and the 9 May celebrations. Like the text, many participants described the decision to ban the ribbon as insulting the memory of their relatives who fought in World War II.

8.3.1 Dominant reading – it is a sacred symbol

Most participants agreed with the narrative and took a dominant position, expressing that banning the St George ribbon in Latvia was wrong. The reasons why it was considered wrong differed; many thought it was disrespectful to those who fought in World War II. For example, Nikolai had a strong connection to 9 May and the ribbon, which he associated with his grandfather:

(Nikolai, 27, Daugavpils) My grandfather told me directly [about the war]. He was at the front. (...) It will not be forgotten. I will tell my children and grandchildren how my grandfather fought. (...) Why can't I wear a ribbon in memory of my grandfather? Because that's what the [Latvian] government has decided. It's absurd. (...) I can't do anything about it, so – inaction. I don't know why people haven't gone out with guns yet [laughs].

For Nikolai, the ribbon was emotionally connected with the memory of his grandfather, and he saw the decision to ban the ribbon as a way for the Latvian government to annoy him and other Russian speakers in Latvia. Like many other participants, he described protesting as pointless and felt nothing would change. In the focus group and the follow-up interview, he stated that the Latvian government could destroy and ban both monuments and symbols, but he would still have his memory. Another participant who also had a strong emotional relationship with the ribbon was Emiliya, who had worked as a volunteer looking after war veterans:

(Emiliya, 24, Riga) It's taboo. You can't touch it, you can't rewrite it. You can't disagree, you can't say that it didn't happen, that Salaspils was a place of rest for us, not a place where people were killed and burned. For me, 9 May is a sacred topic. It's also the fact that my grandparents always carried flowers, didn't drink there, didn't go to the monument to eat or have fun, but carried flowers because their parents had lived through the war.

For Emiliya, the day and the associated symbols were a sacred topic due to her involvement in working with veterans and how she used to come to the monument in Riga with her parents and put down flowers on 9 May. She was emotionally affected by the ban and by how it affected the veterans she cared

for. The interpretation of history as a message also resonated with her as she rejected the Latvian government's interpretation of history. As an example, she brought up Salaspils, a city outside of Riga where Jews were killed in the Holocaust. More importantly, Salaspils is a symbol of the suffering of the Soviet people under the Nazi occupation of Latvia, where political prisoners were held and many of them died. Besides mentioning Salaspils, other participants emphasised fascists in Latvia, for example Varya, who discussed 9 May during the follow-up interview:

(Varya, 30, Daugavpils) Why is this happening right now in Latvia? As far as I know, the EU bans the celebration of 16 March. It bears the victory of the fascists. It doesn't matter that it's forbidden in Latvia; it takes place officially. The descendants of these fascists, they're in power at the moment. They're descendants of losers who want to change history and rub it off. They're infuriated by everything connected with this holiday [9 May] and want to eliminate these monuments.

Similar to Emiliya's example of Salaspils, Varya brought up 16 March, the date soldiers of the Latvian Legion part of the Waffen-SS are commemorated (see chapter on context). The day is controversial because the legion was a unit of Nazi Germany. More importantly, it is heavily used in the Russian strategic narratives in which Russia narrates Latvia as a country that glorifies Nazism. This framing is often reinforced by Russian state-controlled media (see Chapter 5), where Latvia's celebration of anti-Soviet resistance is perceived as a sign of fascism.

Many participants had strong personal relationships with the St George ribbon. For them, it symbolised how their relatives fought for their freedom. Interestingly, they emphasised the tradition connected to the symbol. Natalia described the ban as similar to forbidding wearing the Latvian flag on Independence Day. Viktor likened the ban to having to celebrate Christmas without a Christmas tree. Elena described it as celebrating New Year's without fireworks. The ribbon was thus not just a piece of material but a symbol and part of a tradition that was important for many Russian speakers in Latvia. The examples they mentioned show that the symbol carries profound meaning and connects them to a larger community where it has become part of a tradition that strengthens relationships and builds community. Celebrating Victory Day fosters shared meanings and feelings of belonging to this group.

While several participants had personal connections to the ribbon, other participants who took a dominant position stated that it was wrong to ban something in general and emphasised that Latvia was a free country where a person should be able to wear whatever symbol they wanted. For example, Valentin expressed similar opinions as with the media ban:

(Valentin, 20, Liepāja) We live in a free country and should be able to use and wear whatever we want. No one has the right to hinder or forbid us, for

example, to put on the St George ribbon. Hang it in memory of your great-uncle, who fought and liberated Latvia. (...) It gives the impression that people in the Saeima [parliament] have nothing to do or are so uneducated that they think it would be better to get attached to some St George ribbon than to solve larger and more serious problems in Latvia.

Besides something being banned in principle, Valentin also questioned the importance of such a ban, adding that there are more important problems to solve in Latvian society. This opinion was common among participants, especially those who accepted the narrative. As shown in previous quotes, participants attached great importance to the symbol and this day. They questioned why the Latvian parliament spent so much time and effort on banning ribbons and TV channels, stressing that there were bigger problems to deal with in Latvia. Overall, there was a lack of understanding of why the ribbon could be perceived as hurtful to Latvians. In most focus groups, there was no reflection about the changed meaning of the symbol following Russia's war in Ukraine, except for those who opposed the narrative and agreed with banning the St George ribbon.

While some participants stated that they themselves did not have a close relationship with the ribbon, they understood that it was important for a large part of the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia. One participant who rejected the first two narratives but did a dominant reading of the history narrative was Anastasia, who stated that the symbol was important for veterans in Latvia:

(Anastasia, 29, Riga) I probably wouldn't forbid the St George ribbon because the veterans use it. They have their associations. It's their symbol; let them use it. They wear them daily. (...) It's a symbol that's associated with the events related to them. It's not a hammer and sickle. It's not a swastika. It's something completely different.

Anastasia was a selective user and was critical of the narrative on the education reform and the media ban. She thought, however, that the symbol was not equivalent to other forbidden symbols connected with the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Like the ban on Russian media, the decision did not affect her directly, but she expressed solidarity with the Russian speakers for whom this ribbon was an important symbol. Compared to the closing of Russian television channels, banning the St George ribbon may be seen as a politically motivated decision that was less about national security and more about silencing the Russian-speaking minority. Even though they do not support the Russian government, many participants may still perceive that the ban unnecessarily politicises a symbol of historical memory.

Affect is the intensity with which we experience both reason and emotion (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 134), and this narrative is an interesting example of the intensity with which a narrative's symbolic impact is anticipated, felt and processed. Emotional connections to the symbol were expressed by Nikolai and

Valentin, where wearing the ribbon is seen as a way to honour and keep alive the memory of their families' sacrifice during the war. For these participants, the ban may feel like a denial of personal history, resulting in feelings of grief and loss. Russian speakers may perceive that by banning the ribbon, Latvia attempts to downplay or erase the Russian speakers' contribution to the defeat of fascism during World War II. As such, the ban might feel like an attack on this cultural tradition and lead to feelings of resentment and disrespect. For these participants, the ribbon is not a symbol of pro-Russian sentiment but is mainly associated with their family and ancestors.

8.3.2 Negotiated reading – I do not want to take a position

While participants who did a dominant reading had strong feelings associated with the narrative through their own experience and via the stories told by their relatives about the war, there were also strong feelings of ambivalence among participants who took a negotiated position. Many participants initially stated that they did not want to take a position regarding this topic. Compared to the two previous narratives, this narrative forced people to take a position. Many participants described that they were very tired of this topic and the way it forced them to take a stance and express some opinion:

(Fedora, 25, Daugavpils) There was too much noise around it. (...) I hate this topic because everyone has to speak out. I'm Latvian in the first place. Then, I'm already a Russian-speaking person. Of course, I listen to everyone in both directions. That's why I'm annoyed by the topic of the St George ribbon.

(Ivan, 28, Daugavpils) Many people take the symbol too seriously, and a lot of attention is paid to it. Many people are offended. (...) Let's say someone's more patriotic, others perceive it as an occupation. You can't retrain people so easily; it's just changing with generations. It's not good that they forbid symbols, although we have forbidden symbols related to World War II. It's difficult.

Both Fedora and Ivan in Daugavpils were under the impression that too many people took the symbols too seriously. Like most participants who took a negotiated position, they could understand both sides of the conflict and felt caught in-between as Russian-speaking Latvians. Nadezhda expressed that polarisation would be involved every year:

(Nadezhda, 24, Riga) Every year there's news about 9 May. (...) It's better not to open anything because there's fierce hatred in the comments [section]. (...) For me, it's generally a celebration of victory, and nothing [to do] with what's happening in Latvia. I understand the anger of those trying to ban all this, because on 9 May, I saw what was happening. Everyone came, shouting "Russia" and singing Katyusha⁷ there. They would walk around with Russian

⁷⁷ Katyusha is a Russian folk song that became popular during World War II as a patriotic song.

flags. I believe that it's wrong. (...) Banning all symbols won't help at all. The symbol is worn by calm people for whom it means something; he wears it for his relatives who died there. It's like a memory. Well, I don't know ... I'm probably against the ban. But I'm also against what's happening; it no longer applies to the symbol.

Like Fedora, Nadezhda experienced a lot of noise around 9 May in Latvia. She actively avoided social media and other news during that time, as there usually were hateful comments about the event. While she could see both sides, she could not take a position for or against the narrative. While some participants expressed strong and sometimes ambivalent feelings about the narrative, others, like Fyodor, used logic to make sense of it:

(Fyodor, 21, Riga) If Soviet and fascist symbols are forbidden in Latvia, the St George ribbon falls under this category. Therefore, the ban is probably reasonable. Let's not get into historical reasons as to whether this is right or wrong. (...) I don't know; maybe I'm not extremely patriotic. In my opinion, if we believe that we shouldn't have Soviet and fascist symbols, then to some extent, this may be reasonable. I probably don't share the opinion, but I understand.

Contrary to Anastasia, who agreed with the Russian narrative, Fyodor pointed out that the ribbon fell under the same category of prohibited symbols as Soviet and fascist symbols in Latvia. Therefore, it was reasonable to ban the ribbon. Like Fyodor, many participants also rationally understood the decision to ban the ribbon, but their feelings about it were emotional and ambivalent. It was the opposite of the education narrative. While participants had negative experiences of the education reform but logically agreed that it was good, with the history narrative, they could logically understand that the symbol was banned but disagreed with it and felt emotionally connected to the St George ribbon.

Participants who took a negotiated position felt loyal to Latvia and their Russian heritage. As voiced by Fedora, they felt that the ban forced them to choose between their cultural identity and adherence to Latvian laws. Some participants felt that people took the symbol too seriously and wished for the issue to be depoliticised, advocating for a more nuanced approach that acknowledges the concerns of both Latvian and Russian speakers. At the same time, the conflict surrounding the ribbon could evoke feelings of internal conflict and a sense of identity in flux. Feeling pressured to take a side and experiencing conflicting narratives and personal experiences might lead to feelings of confusion and anxiety (Ahmed, 2005). As a result, participants might take a negotiated position.

Being able to see both sides, participants who took a negotiated position were more likely to recognise Latvia's concerns and fear of Russian influence, as expressed by Nadezhda. They thus might accept that from a Latvian perspective, the ban was a way to protect national sovereignty and ban symbols

that can be seen as promoting foreign propaganda, particularly considering the current geopolitical situation.

8.3.3 Oppositional reading – the symbol’s meaning has changed

Few participants disagreed with the narrative. While most participants had some relationship to the ribbon and 9 May, those who did an oppositional reading reflected on the symbol having gained a different meaning with time. For them, this was one of the main reasons why they considered it to be the right decision to ban the ribbon:

(Konstantin, 21, Liepāja) In Ukraine, it’s on Russian equipment; they draw it on the uniform, hang it, and so on. Many people associate it with this. My great-grandfather also fought in the war; he liberated Berlin on a tank. When he came back, he also had all his medals and just drank on 8 and 9 May. That’s why I always found what was happening in Moscow and other cities when people were celebrating the victory and so on, because I know that my great-grandfather didn’t approve of it in any way. That’s why the St George ribbons, which were created to honour the memory, including my great-grandfather, were then used to kill other people again and to use propaganda to go around with these flags, these St George ribbons and so on. So I support [the ban].

In the follow-up interview, Konstantin shared that before the war, he was against banning the ribbon because it was against his liberal values. For him, it was no longer a symbol of memory but “a symbol of this propaganda myth built around it”. Konstantin also reflected upon how Russia used the ribbon to legitimise its war in Ukraine. He considered it to be an exploitation of the historical memory of many Russian speakers in Latvia, which also could be one of the possible reasons why this narrative resonated with so many participants, even those who were critical of the other narratives and Russian state-controlled media in general. Another participant who reflected upon the symbol’s changed meaning was Ofeliya. She contested the narrative and shared her childhood memories connected to the ribbon:

(Ofeliya, 19, Daugavpils) As a child (...), I used to bring them [the veterans] flowers. It was very important to me because I understood that these people had gone through the war. Thanks to them, I live now. (...) With the current government of Russia, this holiday has been distorted beyond recognition. I remember from my childhood this atmosphere when everyone’s just happy. It’s a holiday when you’re glad that everyone’s alive, everyone’s healthy, and you help your grandparents. (...) In Russia, it’s a parade of military equipment every year.

Like Konstantin, Ofeliya questioned the militarisation and exploitation of the symbol. Several participants felt that the event associated with the ribbon had

changed and turned into something else. For example, consider this excerpt from a focus group in Riga:

(Klara, 25, Riga) It's very unpleasant when Russians go into the streets and drink and shout, "Thank you, grandpa, for the victory!" (...) It's unpleasant that people have such an impression about Russians who live here and, in general, about Russians who celebrate like this.

(Kira, 27, Riga) (...) "We can repeat", well on cars (...)

(Galina, 25, Riga) Terrible ...

(Kira, 27, Riga) The Russians write this. Here [in Latvia], Russians behave the same way. I saw these drunken Russians with St George ribbons waving them like that.

Klara, Kira and Galina reflected upon the changed meaning of the ribbon and expressed an unpleasant feeling about Russian speakers misbehaving in public around this event, making them all look bad. While participants acknowledged the importance of recognising and honouring their relatives' sacrifices, they rejected the way some people exploit or trivialise history. Most participants who did an oppositional reading of the text criticised how the symbol had become associated with excessive patriotism. The ribbon's changed meaning and associations lead to participants opposing the narrative. Some participants, however, rejected the symbol specifically for its Soviet associations:

(Vera, 27, Daugavpils) I support the law adopted in Latvia. Because this St George ribbon is a symbol of victory in Russia. (...) It's the victory of Soviet soldiers over fascism. By putting on and attaching this St George ribbon here in Latvia, a person openly declares that he supports the Soviet regime. (...) For me, the St George ribbon is associated with the Soviet regime, I believe that wearing it is the same as wearing ribbons with swastikas.

(Anton, 29, Daugavpils) I roughly agree with Vera that Latvia was occupied by both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. I will not say that both countries wished Latvia any good development. Everyone here was pursuing their interests. (...) I believe the St George ribbons are symbols of the occupation of Latvia.

The conversation in Vera and Anton's focus group in Daugavpils was one of the few examples where participants mentioned a Soviet occupation of Latvia. It was one of the reasons for justifying the banning of the symbol in Latvia and for disagreeing with the Russian narrative. Few participants opposed the narrative and there was little focus on the victims of Soviet repressions and reflection on how Latvians felt about the ribbon and the associations connected to the symbol. Furthermore, while there were discussions about the military parades in Russia, no participants reflected upon 9 May and the ribbon as part of the Sovietisation of Latvian society (see e.g. Zelče, 2018).

Participants who opposed the narrative perceived that it was not just a symbol of historical memory but had become an instrument Russia weaponised to promote Russian nationalism and imperialism. As such, these participants were critical of how Russia used symbols like the St George ribbon to promote a specific state-controlled version of historical memory. They also felt frustrated with how the Russian government manipulates historical symbols to serve their political agenda, as shown by military parades and by the Russian military putting the symbol on military objects in Ukraine.

Oppositional readers also tended to prioritise national unity and to perceive symbols like the St George ribbon, associated with Russian strategic narratives, to be dividing Latvian society among ethnic and linguistic lines. By supporting the ban, they might feel they are contributing to a more unified Latvian society where Latvian and Russian speakers can focus on improving the country instead of competing over historical narratives and symbols.

Finally, although this was rarely expressed, participants may feel that they acknowledge and respect the Latvian historical experience, as discussed by Vera and Anton, who mentioned the Soviet occupation of Latvia. By doing so, they acknowledge the suffering many Latvians endured during Soviet rule. This realisation, however, might create feelings of guilt and shame (Ahmed, 2005) as well as disassociation from the history that parents, schools and cultural institutions have told them. These participants might also feel emotionally distant from Soviet nostalgia.

8.4 Discussion

Comparing participants' different analytical and positional readings of the texts on a connotative level, what can be said about similarities and differences? As shown in the previous chapter, most participants expressed in discussions that they felt that the problems in the texts were exaggerated. The emotional language of the texts was also often rejected. As such, participants took different positions towards the narrative message, not necessarily because of the text but in spite of it. This was most probably due to the problems raised being actual problems among Russian speakers in Latvian society. Participants also had close direct experiences of these problems in their everyday lives. Agreeing or disagreeing with a message had more to do with the problem itself than with the narrative projected by Sputnik Latvia.

Few participants did a dominant or oppositional reading of all three narratives. Instead, most participants demonstrated different positions, shifting their responses depending on the specific narrative. While a small group consistently aligned with or opposed all three narratives, most participants displayed nuanced and context-dependent engagement with the narratives.

The suggested fear of forced assimilation regarding the education reform did not resonate with most participants. They did not express that the

education reform threatened their identity as Russian speakers in Latvia. On the contrary, they found it an important step towards creating fair opportunities for Latvian and Russian speakers in terms of receiving higher education and getting attractive jobs. The negative rhetoric about Latvian authorities was also rejected. Most often, participants were suspicious of the information and described it as manipulative. Russian authorities were rejected as actors, and participants also rejected the narration of themselves as victims of forced assimilation. As such, the education narrative did not engage participants emotionally like the history narrative.

Confirming previous studies (Wagnsson & Lundström, 2023) the decision to ban Russian TV channels is a great example of how a narrative does not need to be coherent to be persuasive. Regardless of city and age, participants were critical of Russia and state-controlled media, which they took part of indirectly through YouTubers discussing such content. Many participants described Russia as hypocritical for smearing Latvia regarding freedom of speech, mentioning Russia's foreign agents law and how independent Russian media outlets had to leave Russia to perform their work. Yet, participants nonetheless agreed with the narrative that it was wrong of Latvia to ban Russian channels. The focus was on Latvia and how badly it acted as a democratic country, while less focus was on Russia. Overall, participants who regularly consumed news from Latvian sources were more understanding of Latvia's decision to ban. One of the reasons for this could be that they probably had been more exposed to Latvian counter-narratives on this specific issue.

Many participants focused on the principle of freedom of speech and agreed with the problem – that it was wrong to ban Russian television because doing so was against the democratic principle. They were less interested in what this meant for the Russia–Latvia relationship or for Russian speakers in Latvia. One reason this narrative resonated could be that it was against one of their moral values, freedom of speech, and as such, activated participants' readings of this narrative text emotionally.

The ban of the St George ribbon was discussed differently, possibly because the narrative triggered collective identification. The narrative concerning history was considered the most emotional narrative. The text was relatively neutral, yet the message was saturated with affect as participants had strong associations with the symbol and everything surrounding it. They also had direct personal experiences of growing up in an environment where the ribbon was part of their identity as Russian speakers in Latvia. Participants who had relatives who fought in World War II and usually had celebrated 9 May with their parents felt strongly about the narrative.

Participants had different perceptions of 9 May; for some it was a day of commemoration, for others it was a holiday and a family ritual. Regardless, it is a unifying element and part of the Russian-speaking identity in Latvia (see e.g. Zelče, 2018). Political elites use symbols and rituals to legitimise their

hold on power. Ritual practices can be seen as a way of spreading political myths. Furthermore, it is a historical narrative that denies the damage done by the state to its citizens (Domańska, 2022), here interpreted as what the Soviet Union did to Latvia. As such, it can be said that this strategic narrative resonates with participants because it is coherent with the local myth (Schmitt, 2018) among Russian speakers.

Before the media texts were introduced for discussion in the focus groups, 9 May was mentioned in almost every group as a topic that Russian and Latvian media bring up every year. During 2022, it was more topical than ever due to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Participants had been raised with this Victory Day since birth, and it was part of their education.

While participants expressed attachments to the narratives in different ways, there was still a distance towards the Russian actors in the narratives and often even rejection. There were, however, certain overlaps in the narrations. For example, participants to varying extents described Latvian authorities as incompetent, suggesting decisions were made for political reasons instead of trying to solve problems. They did not, however, describe Latvian authorities as villains, which was common in the Russian strategic narratives. They described this as loud and exaggerated, blowing the problem out of proportion. Participants agreed that these were real problems, but their views on how to solve them differed.

The findings suggest that strategic narratives are persuasive when they move us emotionally, whether by exploiting existing grievances, as suggested by previous research on strategic narratives (Deverell et al., 2021), or by engaging our bodily memories, as suggested by affect research (Ahmed, 2004b). When we are moved emotionally, it makes us less likely to critically evaluate a narrative message if it resonates with collective feelings. This is an interesting finding as most participants did not reflect on the pain the St George ribbon may inflict on Latvians when discussing its ban and how it could be a hurtful symbol. Few participants mentioned that there was a Soviet occupation of Latvia. This begs the question of whether emotional narratives also make it difficult to see the 'other' and contribute to polarisation and division among ethnic and linguistic lines.

What do these findings mean for the reception of strategic narratives? The findings suggest that participants indeed considered Russian state media propagandistic. Yet, they did not spontaneously reproduce the overarching strategic narrative as seen in previous studies (see Szostek, 2018). While there were some overlaps, participants expressed agency and interpreted the narratives based on their knowledge and experiences. As such, the findings provide a few suggestions.

First, the participants grew up in a Russian media ecology, where parents and family members regularly watch Russian state-controlled television. At the same time, due to their use of both Latvian and Russian media, they were exposed to different competing narratives. As a result, the participants mixed

different narratives and accepted some parts while rejecting others, depending on the issue at stake.

Second, most participants went to Russian language schools where they were taught a Russian perspective of historical events, including the occupation of Latvia and the outcome of World War II. Many of them also had social connections with Russia and visited Russia as part of the school programme or to visit relatives. At the same time, they grew up in Latvia, and most of them were well integrated into Latvian society. Most participants had friends who spoke Russian and Latvian. All these factors combined created resilience and room to make up their own minds regarding these narratives. They also made it possible for participants to take a negotiated position where they could understand both sides of the problem.

In the previous chapter I asked whether an audience needs to have a personal and direct experience of a narrative in order for it to resonate. The findings suggest that the answer is no. Having direct and personal experience of a narrative seems to increase the chances of a participant taking a critical position towards it. One such example is the reception of the narrative on the education reform, where most participants had negative experiences yet rejected the narrative, which they described as too emotional and exaggerated. While participants considered the fact that many do not speak Latvian as a more important problem than the education reform, they expressed that parents and relatives were more worried about it. This finding suggests that indirect experience might be more persuasive.

Having indirect experience through family and relatives may create feelings of solidarity. Thus, a collective experience may increase the chances that participants will take a dominant position and accept the strategic narrative. Similarly, parents might worry more about the education reform, while young people are more relaxed towards the issue.

A strategic narrative is more likely to resonate with an audience if it aligns with their values and beliefs (Colley, 2017; Edenborg, 2022; Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019, 2021; Hudson, 2015; Khaldarova, 2021). As such, they are more likely to accept a narrative that fits their understanding of the world. This is one possible explanation for why the history narrative resonates strongly with many participants, especially as it resonates with collective identity (Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2019; Schmitt, 2018). The narrative was, however, rejected by participants who were heavy or selective users and were more exposed to Latvian narratives. This combination of Western values and loyalty to Latvia made the narrative less persuasive among this group. Strategic narratives are not crafted out of thin air and usually build upon existing narratives, which may be deeply held, and the narratives are subject to contestation and may be contradicted by events (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 109). This can explain why the education narrative did not resonate, as Latvian narratives have been well established.

Even when the source of a strategic narrative is rejected, it may persuade if it includes a moral dimension. This can be a possible explanation as to why the media narrative resonated with participants, because it appealed to a sense of righteousness. Thus, by framing Latvia as infringing upon freedom of speech by banning Russian media, participants were more likely to overlook Russia's behaviour and agree with the narrative.

Finally, when comparing the strategic narratives and participants' reception of them, it should be borne in mind that emotion and logic are not endpoints of a continuum but coexist and work together (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 134). Logic and reasoning help us make sense of our emotions and help us understand why we feel a certain way, which in turn can help us process that feeling. Emotions give meaning to logic and add significance and depth to logical thoughts, making them more personally meaningful. Emotions can, in this way, also motivate or contextualise our reasoning, allowing us to engage with it on a deeper level. This means that people can resist ideological control and manipulation that exploits emotions while allowing affect and reason to coexist in meaningful, democratic ways.

Concluding remarks

This chapter took the reception analysis one step further by shifting focus to a connotative level of meaning. It explored participants' analytical discursive readings and their positions when approaching these narratives as messages. Few participants did a dominant or oppositional reading of all three narratives. Instead, most participants demonstrated different positions, shifting their responses depending on the specific narrative. Most participants displayed nuanced and context-dependent engagement with the narratives. Having direct and personal experience of a narrative may increase the chances of a participant taking a critical position towards it. On the other hand, having indirect experience through family and relatives may create feelings of solidarity. Thus, a collective experience increases the chances that participants will take a dominant position and accept the strategic narrative. The findings suggest that strategic narratives are persuasive when they move an audience emotionally or align with the audience's existing values and beliefs.

PART III

9 Conclusion

This chapter will conclude the study by summarising the key findings in relation to the aim and research questions as well as the value and contribution thereof. It will also review the study's limitations and make suggestions for future research.

9.1 Summary

This dissertation set out to explore narrative persuasion and how young Russian speakers in Latvia make sense of Russian strategic narratives. More specifically, it has dealt with the ways strategic narratives become persuasive in this context and the ways they are able to persuade a target audience. This section presents the main research findings from the empirical chapters. It describes how the findings collectively contribute to understanding narrative persuasion through projection and reception.

In Chapter 5, three strategic narratives about Latvia were described, firmly anchored in Russia's foreign policy objectives and voiced by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs during press briefings when discussing Latvia. The strategic narratives concerned history, freedom of speech and language and were projected by Sputnik Latvia between 2019 and 2021 through consistent and systematic reporting. Sputnik Latvia closely followed the timing and statements made by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and used different actors to reinforce the narratives and amplify their reach.

More specifically, these narratives were found to promote the Russian language, bolster Russian media and promote Russia's perception of history, highlighting their role in liberating Eastern Europe from Nazi occupation. These three narratives typically describe Latvia's actions as a problem and suggest the solution to be to adhere to Russia's demands of allowing Russian speakers to acquire education in Russian, access Russian television channels and wear the St George ribbon. The findings suggest that these narratives are strategic because they are systematic and consistent and try to persuade by targeting contradictions and anxieties in Latvia's identity and self-image. The purpose of Russia's narrative persuasion is to get others to change their behaviour by publicising their faults, bolstering Russia's own identity and undermining others.

In these narratives, Latvia was portrayed as an unfriendly and Russophobic state inferior to the Russian Federation. Latvian authorities were simultaneously narrated as both evil and calculating, yet at the same time foolish and incompetent. Russian actors and experts as well as Russian speakers in Latvia were simultaneously narrated as both heroic resisters and victims of Latvian Russophobia. This strategy is persuasive because the narration of Latvia as evil taps into moral condemnation. By calling Latvia evil, they justify viewing it as a legitimate threat. Describing Latvia's actions as hostile or inherently wrong, they can mobilise negative public sentiment towards Latvia among Russian speakers and justify countermeasures by Russia.

At the same time, by characterising Latvia as foolish, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Sputnik Latvia downplay any serious challenge Latvia might pose. Portraying Latvia as malicious but incompetent, they suggest that Latvia's actions of blocking Russian media or banning the St George ribbon are laughable, delegitimising Latvia's position and undermining any authority it might claim on the international stage. This way of narrating creates a sense of Russian superiority and allows Russian speakers to see Latvia as a worthy adversary and an easy target at the same time. Labelling Latvia as both foolish and evil might also balance competing narratives among Russian speakers, where some might see Latvian authorities as a genuine threat to their identity while others perceive them as insignificant.

While perceiving Latvia as part of a legitimate sphere of interest, the incompetence label taps into the Russian stereotype that former Soviet states, especially the Baltics, cannot govern themselves effectively without Russian oversight or influence. Portraying Latvia as hostile towards its Russian-speaking minority, the narrative can create a sense that Russian speakers in Latvia need Russia's protection. This narration may also encourage Russian speakers in Latvia to see themselves as victims of an unfair and hostile state where Russia portrays itself as a defender of Russian speakers against an incompetent, yet evil Latvian government. Smearing Latvia thus becomes a way to make Russian speakers in Latvia sceptical towards the Latvian authorities.

Chapter 6 described the media ecology in which these strategic narratives were projected and received. As described in the chapter on context, Latvia's media ecology is, to a certain extent, still divided into two separate media ecologies, a Latvian and a Russian one. Taking part in both media ecologies, the participants in this study were overall critical of news media in general and Russian state-controlled media in particular. They got their news from social media directly through subscriptions to different news media outlets online and indirectly as they were shared by friends and family in their newsfeeds.

By presenting the conflicts with drama and intensity, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Sputnik Latvia increase the chances that other media outlets will pick up the narratives. For example, many YouTubers that are popular among young Russian speakers in Latvia cater to Russian-speaking audiences by engaging with Russian state narratives by repeating, critiquing

or modifying them. Parts of Sputnik's content are also often appropriated or mocked in meme culture, which young Russian speakers will likely encounter online. This second-hand exposure when Sputnik's content is being shared, summarised or referenced by YouTubers, media channels or personal networks means that these narratives nonetheless are embedded in the digital media ecology young Russian speakers in Latvia inhabit.

Four groups of news media repertoires were identified based on the participants' reported media use: heavy users, selective users, algorithmic users and news avoiders. Heavy users had a great interest in news, read the news every day and consumed news from a variety of different sources. They subscribed to both Latvian and Russian news sources. Selective users were more proactive in their news consumption and had actively adjusted their algorithms. They were more prone to subscribe to Russian independent and Latvian public service media. Algorithmic users came across news casually while scrolling through their social media feeds. They were the biggest group and only sporadically looked for news actively. News avoiders had a low interest in news and actively avoided accessing news material. They were more interested in first-hand sources and stories shared by ordinary people.

The findings show that news media repertoires are important for narrative persuasion for three main reasons. First, including media repertoires in studying the reception of narratives contributes to a contextual understanding of the process that is not isolated to a specific platform or media outlet, especially since narratives in a hybrid media ecology are spread across multiple platforms. Second, news media repertoires expose audiences to different narratives. Heavy and selective users were more likely to expose themselves to Latvian strategic narratives than news avoiders and algorithmic users. Examining media repertoires provides insights into cultural and social factors influencing media use and the reception of narratives. Third, people have different levels of media literacy. Heavy users were more used to critically analysing and comparing different sources. In contrast, news avoiders were less familiar with journalistic practices or persuasive techniques as they infrequently engaged with news. Thus, media use influences how individuals interpret and respond to narratives.

Participants who were heavy and selective users were more prone to disagree with the Russian strategic narrative and adopt a critical reading, suggesting that regular exposure to competing strategic narratives resulted in the Russian strategic narratives not resonating as strongly. Strong media literacy skills also seem to increase participants' likelihood of resisting emotionally engaging narratives. These participants tended to be more aware of and recognise manipulative techniques such as appeals to emotion, selective storytelling and sensationalism. They also tended to analyse the motives behind the content. Knowing that Russian state-controlled media often use emotional narratives to influence perceptions of Latvia, they may view these narratives as less credible or trustworthy, even if the content initially resonates emotionally.

The digital hybrid media ecology in Latvia is highly fragmented, which can make people more vulnerable to narratives filled with affect that resonate emotionally. Even if people usually are sceptical of biased or propagandistic messaging, emotional narratives have a unique ability to bypass rational defence and scepticism, where appealing to feelings of identity, injustice, pride or empathy might override logical scrutiny. In a fragmented media ecology, participants commented that it was difficult to get a complete picture of what was happening, especially when various sources presented the same event differently, which can be perceived as confusing and emotionally draining. The pandemic and the war further increased these feelings of ambivalence and news fatigue among young Russian speakers in Latvia. The war has also polarised ethnic divisions in Latvian society, and many Russian speakers experience a form of existential crisis. Events like the removal of historical monuments associated with Russian speakers created very strong emotions among the Russian-speaking minority. These events made participants vulnerable to narratives that engage emotionally and exploit grievances.

Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 describe how participants interpreted and retold the strategic narratives embedded in the Sputnik Latvia texts, examined through the lens of denotative and connotative levels of meaning using Michelle's (2007) reception model. This study found that participants neither fully replicated nor entirely rejected the narratives. Instead, participants moved between close and distant readings when making sense of the narrative texts. Most participants predominantly did a mediated reading of the education reform, a referential reading of the media ban and a transparent reading of the ban of the St George ribbon before they shifted to a discursive mode of reception focusing on the message itself.

The narrative text concerning the education reform was described as controversial and emotionally written. Participants emphasised the wording, which they interpreted as an attempt to move the reader in a certain direction. In a critical, mediated mode, participants discussed the intentions and motivations behind the writing and speculated whom the text was written for.

In contrast, the narrative text concerning history was perceived as neutrally written and described by participants as less emotional than the other two texts. Participants read this narrative in a transparent mode or moved to a referential mode, taking the text at face value and mentioning relatives who fought in the war. In a close, transparent mode, participants were much less critical of the text and expressed that the text and the narrative resonated with them.

The narrative text concerning freedom of speech generated mixed readings among participants. Some read the text in a mediated mode, while others moved between referential and transparent readings of the narrative. Participants reacted to the emotional language, as with the education narrative, but focused more on how the decision to ban Russian television channels in Latvia would affect their parents and grandparents. Some participants put more

emphasis on the principle of freedom of speech, arguing that the ban was discriminatory because it limited the number of information sources in Latvia. Freedom of speech was seen as a complex and abstract issue, which could explain participants' indecisiveness as to what to think about the narrative. This narrative was fairly new compared to the other two narratives, as Russian media outlets started to be banned from Latvian territory after 2014 following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea.

Why did participants make sense of these three narrative texts in such different ways? Focusing on the narration, participants expressed that how the history narrative was written corresponded to how they preferred to access news. The education narrative, on the other hand, was described as too emotional and exaggerated in its form. This finding suggests that emotional language does not necessarily resonate with young Russian speakers in Latvia. They often tend to be more sceptical and better equipped to double-check information with other sources, which may limit the influence of Russian strategic narratives perceived as overly biased or propagandistic. Therefore, narratives might need to include content that appears more balanced, credible or subtly persuasive to engage a younger audience in this context.

The findings suggest that it is not enough for a strategic narrative to be topical or relate to participants' personal experiences. In order to resonate, a strategic narrative also needs to be considered personally relevant. The education reform and perceptions of history have been debated in Latvian society for decades. Participants mentioned both issues in the focus groups before discussing the Sputnik Latvia texts, which suggests that they also were current topics discussed by Latvian and Russian media. Interestingly, narratives can persuade even when they fail to appear consistent with events as the audience knows them. For example, many participants still agreed with the narrative although they accused Russia of hypocrisy for lecturing Latvia on freedom of speech. Such hypocrisy may otherwise reduce the narrator's credibility and trustworthiness.

While some participants read all three narratives in a distant mediated mode and rejected them, others read all three narratives in a close transparent mode and accepted them. Most participants moved between different modes of reception depending on the narrative.

By adopting Michelle's (2007) reception model, which has previously been used to study reception among television viewers, this study advances our understanding of how participants make sense of strategic narratives. The reception model has offered a more nuanced approach by shifting between different levels of meaning. It emphasises both the interpretation of the narrative itself and the positions taken towards the message it projects. The reception model moves beyond the one-dimensional focus on ideology prevalent in media studies, where responses to form and content have been conflated, and participants' engagement with connotative meanings has been prioritised over their interaction with denotative meanings. Using this model has thus shown not only what different positions participants take towards the strategic narrative

but also how they perceive the narrative as text, focusing on denotative levels of reception. It also allows researchers to more straightforwardly chart the relationship between participants' different modes of reception and important social and cultural factors such as family background and media use.

Michelle's (2007) model focuses mainly on the horizontal movement between close and distant readings of a text. It is less developed regarding vertical movement between denotative and connotative levels. To illustrate this better, this study adds affect as a factor that moves readers between denotative and connotative levels of meaning as they make sense of a narrative text. Affect thus serves both as a force that increases narrative persuasion, pushing readers to skip denotative levels of meaning and move directly to connotative levels, and as a force that can push a reader into a mediated mode and become critical of the text because of its emotional content.

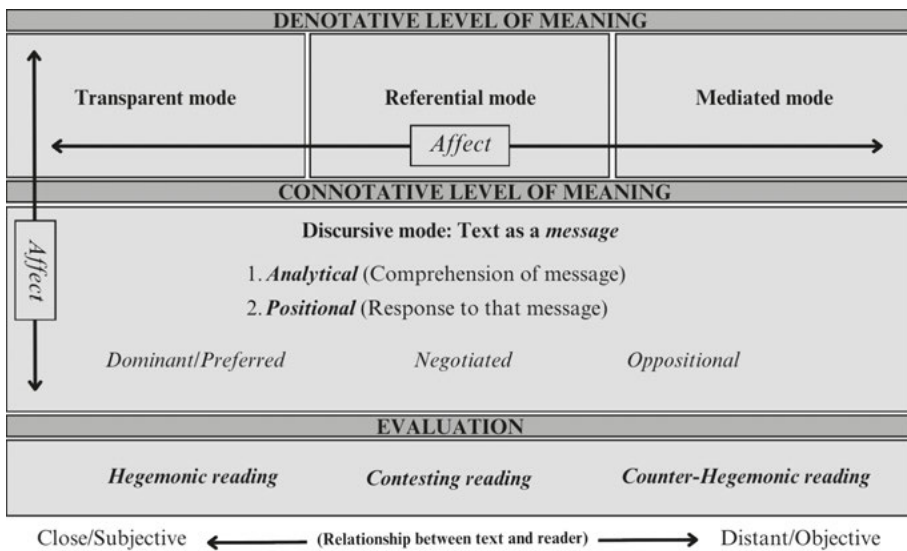


Figure 4. Adaption of Michelle's reception model, adding affect as a central connecting factor for horizontal and vertical movements

In this adapted version of the model, affect thus serves as a central connecting factor. The lines leading outward to each mode indicate affect's role in linking and transitioning between modes. Heightened or diminished affect facilitates shifts. For example, an audience may move not only from a denotative level to a connotative level but also into referential or mediated modes if the emotional intensity shifts and start to analyse or question what they are reading. Similarly, an audience may move into a transparent mode if a narrative resonates emotionally. In other words, affect does not just trigger a shift from one mode to another but rather a dynamic back-and-forth movement. Bringing in

affect can be particularly helpful in this context, where young Russian speakers have grown up with separate media ecologies and, for a long time, have become used to encountering contradictory narratives from Latvian and Russian media pertaining to language and history.

Having presented the Russian strategic narratives, the media ecology in which they are projected and how young Russian speakers receive them, this study, building on previous research, suggests that strategic narratives manage to persuade in three different ways.

First, they manage to persuade because they resonate with participants' worldviews. Having grown up in independent Latvia, young Russian speakers may still be influenced by being part of a Russian-speaking community where a Russian perspective of historical and current events is common among family and friends (Edenborg, 2022; Miskimmon et al., 2013; Schmitt, 2018).

Second, the strategic narratives manage to persuade when they keep problems relevant. Using emotional and sensational language, they are more likely to be picked up by other news media, and they also tend to force people to take a position for or against the narrative. This way, the problems in Latvia are reinforced, although the education reform seems to have lost its relevance as a problem at least for young Russian speakers. In doing so a strategic narrative may appear as inconsistent because of the narrator's non-credibility and non-trustworthiness or the form of its projection, yet still appeal to audiences if the problem is perceived as relevant (Miskimmon et al., 2013; Ringsmose & Børgesen, 2011; Wagnsson & Lundström, 2023).

Third, participants who identify with a narrative emotionally are more likely to be persuaded by a narrative. When participants feel that the content reflects their own feelings, they are more likely to accept it without questioning, thus interpreting it as a genuine portrayal of reality. In other words, the narrative might bypass critical analysis by confirming their feelings (Miskimmon et al., 2013). As for their experience it does not have to be direct; it can also be indirect, as shown by the media narrative. Indirect experience can be just as persuasive, as it triggers feelings of empathy towards people who would be negatively affected. Although they did not watch these TV channels themselves, many expressed frustration towards what they perceived to be a violation of freedom of speech (Szostek, 2017a, 2017b, 2018; Wagnsson & Lundström, 2023).

To conclude, the strategic narratives analysed in this study were interpreted and retold by participants in different ways. Many participants narrated Latvian authorities as somewhat incompetent, but they were also critical of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and stressed Latvia's right to make its own decisions. Importantly, the problems discussed in this study were considered real problems and important for young Russian speakers in Latvia. The problems were brought up by both Latvian and Russian media, where participants felt caught up in-between two competing narratives about the interpretation of history and the role of the Russian language in Latvian society, both being heavily securitised. Participants described these

problems as paralysing Latvian society and shifting focus away from more important problems, such as creating a society where Latvian and Russian speakers can coexist peacefully.

9.2 Contributions

Collected during 2021–2022, this empirical material captures a critical moment in history, marked by significant geopolitical shifts and heightened tensions in the Baltic Sea region. This period included the lead-up to and onset of a full-scale war in Europe, which adds an intense layer of urgency and complexity to the narrative environment these individuals navigate daily. As Latvia shares historical, cultural and linguistic ties with Russia, the war directly affects the Russian-speaking minority in the country, influencing both their self-perception and the narratives they encounter.

The research is unique in its focus on youth and has provided rich data collected from three of Latvia's largest cities: Riga, Daugavpils and Liepāja. Recent data from young Russian speakers on the topic contribute to our understanding of their media use and self-perception. Furthermore, this study contributes to research on the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia, where it is concluded that young Russian speakers' media consumption patterns are far from uniform. They are also not a homogeneous group and have different relationships and associations with these narratives depending on their family background, media use and individual personality.

This thesis has brought together ideas from media and communication studies, international relations and Baltic studies to better understand narrative persuasion and how audiences navigate a hybrid media ecology while engaging with and encountering competing narratives. The results of this study provide theoretical insight into these research fields.

The results of this study mainly contribute to media and communication studies. By studying not only media use but also how young Russian speakers perceive media as a text and an object, researchers can better understand the media ecology in which strategic narratives are projected and received. Rapid technological changes and shifting media ecologies make it difficult for state actors to control their narratives. Using emotional content is one way to increase the chances of a narrative being picked up by other media outlets and influencers. Bringing in cross-media use and news media repertoires as social and cultural factors that influence the reception of strategic narratives and narrative persuasion also increases our understanding of why certain narratives resonate. Fragmented news reporting on social media makes reception a messy business, influencing which strategic narratives young Russian speakers expose themselves to and how they make sense of different competing narratives. These findings suggest that media literacy skills seem to decrease

narrative persuasion, making it more likely for people to critically assess the narrative despite its emotional connotations.

By adding affect to Michelle's reception model, this study also contributes to reception theory by highlighting the role of emotions, both conscious and unconscious, in how we engage with narratives. Affect contributes to explaining why certain narratives stick with people, influencing how narratives are accepted or rejected. Affect theory can be used to explore why people react to narratives in ways that seem contradictory to their rational beliefs or prior knowledge, as affect theory explores emotional responses that occur before conscious reflection.

By showing how young Russian speakers in Latvia make sense of such narratives in a specific social and cultural context, this study also contributes to research on strategic narratives and international relations studies. While previous experimental studies have focused on cognitive functions in the reception of narratives, this study contributes with a cultural perspective by shifting the focus from what texts do to the audience to what texts mean to them. By exploring how participants make sense of narratives based on their lived experiences, social identities and cultural backgrounds, this study highlights the multiplicity of meanings and how these factors shape the diverse and sometimes conflicting ways different people understand the same narrative. By focusing on sensemaking, it is possible to explore how audiences accept, resist or reinterpret strategic narratives. This knowledge is especially important in societies where certain narratives might be state-sponsored and circulated by powerful actors. Compared to effects research that seeks causal relationships that may overlook the complex reception process, a qualitative approach like this study provides a fuller picture of how individuals and communities interact with strategic narratives.

Finally, this study contributes empirically to Baltic studies by advancing our knowledge on Russia's information influence in Latvia and the media consumption of young Russian speakers. This study offers insights into the perspectives and experiences of a young generation of Russian speakers who have grown up in independent Latvia. This young generation is not only accustomed to navigating conflicting narratives from various media sources but has also developed unique strategies for interpreting such narratives. Unlike previous generations, they engage with information within a complex hybrid media ecology, where narratives from Russian state-controlled media, Latvian public discourse and international news media outlets converge and compete for attention. While some participants compared Latvian and Russian sources to make sense of what was happening, others had decided to avoid news reporting altogether. Some participants had stopped consuming news to protect their mental well-being from the constant flow of conflicting messages.

9.3 Societal implications

The implications of this study extend beyond academia, offering valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to address the reception of strategic narratives. In times of war, narratives projected via the media can become powerful tools for shaping public opinion and mobilising societies. Russia's war in Ukraine carries profound societal implications as emotions such as fear, anger, grief and hope become heightened in times of conflict and crisis. Studying how audiences make sense of narratives is not merely an academic endeavour but a societal imperative.

Human beings are storytellers. We understand and make sense of the world by telling stories, and we use narratives to structure information and construct our identities. In an increasingly complicated world, narratives are attractive because they connect the past, present and future to a meaningful whole. The results suggest that for strategic narratives to resonate, they need to engage the audience emotionally and not diverge too far from their perception of the world. People tend to reject narratives they perceive as inauthentic or overly exaggerated. While exposure to competing narratives seems to reduce the influence of strategic narratives, there is a risk that constant exposure to conflicting emotional narratives might make people numb and lead to narrative fatigue. Emotional numbing is a double-edged sword. While it protects people from being overwhelmed, it can also undermine trust in media and government institutions and lead to further disengagement from public discourse.

When feeling overwhelmed, people risk defaulting to simplistic interpretations or accepting familiar narratives rather than critically engaging with conflicting information. People's experiences of apathy risk being exploited by authoritarian leaders who offer simple solutions to complex problems. In times of war, narratives can redefine national priorities; governments can use fear-inducing narratives to justify wartime actions, emphasise national security over individual freedoms and foster distrust of other nations or groups. Since antagonistic narratives often thrive on disempowerment, such actions risk excluding Russian speakers from public discourse and increase feelings of not belonging in Latvian society.

The rise of generative artificial intelligence will make it more difficult to distinguish authentic narratives from fabricated ones, which might lead to increased scepticism towards all information. AI-driven algorithms also prioritise emotionally charged content. It is important to spread awareness of narrative strategies so that people can recognise and critically question why certain stories evoke strong emotions and how they align with broader societal contexts. Besides promoting critical thinking and incorporating media literacy in education, policymakers should pressure tech companies to prioritise societal well-being over profits. Social media platforms benefit from emotionally charged and divisive content as it boosts engagement. The role of algorithms in the reception of strategic narratives needs to be explored further. Many

participants described their media consumption as serendipitous, possibly making them more vulnerable to hostile information influence from a foreign actor as strategic narratives are amplified online.

Young Russian speakers in this study expressed feeling overwhelmed by the constant flow of negativity in their social media feeds. Journalists should avoid sensationalism and strive to provide balanced news media reporting. The Latvian authorities should strive to provide narratives of hope and counterbalance manipulative content with positive stories that empower audiences. The findings show that inclusive and positive narratives might resonate with audiences and bridge differences instead of deepening divides. Thus, actors should focus on creating common narratives that unite people instead of increasing tensions between different groups. By facilitating dialogue and connection, it is possible to create narratives that support agency, empathy and informed decision-making. When people actively participate in shaping their communities, they are less likely to be persuaded by manipulative narratives. By equipping people with tools to navigate complex media ecologies saturated with affect, it is possible to move beyond fatigue and disconnection.

Finally, while strategic narratives might undoubtedly be powerful, their reception depends on the interplay of structural forces and individual agency. Young Russian speakers in Latvia are a heterogeneous group with different news media preferences, family backgrounds and perspectives of the world. Different narratives resonate with different people despite having common experiences as members of a Russian-speaking minority. While the risks mentioned are real, researchers and policymakers should not overgeneralise their influence. Recognising people's ability to interpret and resist narratives increases the chances of avoiding overly deterministic or alarmist conclusions. Russian strategic narratives manage to persuade as they exploit existing problems and grievances in Latvian society. Creating counter-narratives is necessary, but politicians also need to prioritise solutions to these problems.

9.4 Limitations and suggestions for future research

Every research project operates within certain boundaries that shape its scope and findings. This study is no exception. While this study offers valuable insights into the reception of strategic narratives, it is essential to address the inherent limitations of the study. One important limitation has been the study's sole focus on Russian strategic narratives and Sputnik Latvia. As such, this study has not examined young Russian speakers' reception of Latvian strategic narratives. While these limitations should be considered, including news media use has partly addressed this issue. Moreover, Sputnik is an influential platform for the official narratives the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs wants to project. While young Russian speakers might not actively read Sputnik themselves, the projected narratives will often filter through and spread on social

media, where they gain traction through algorithms, especially on platforms like Telegram or TikTok, where content is shared beyond original audiences.

Based on the limitations and challenges encountered, this study proposes three pathways for future research to refine existing knowledge and expand inquiry in this field. First, future research should study the reception of strategic narratives that are more distant to individuals to explore whether narratives are perceived differently depending on how distant and important they are to individuals. One limitation of this study was that it only studied issue narratives that participants had direct or indirect experiences of, such as the education reform, the closing of Russian media channels and the ban of the St George ribbon. It is invariably challenging to explain the reasoning when it comes to why a certain narrative resonates and to what extent it has to do with other factors not connected to Sputnik Latvia. Kaprāns and Mieriņa (2019b) found that crucial local ethno-political events have a much weaker impact on Russophones' identification than international and profoundly mediated events that cannot be corroborated by direct experience. This would be an interesting and important phenomenon to explore further.

Second, while this study focused exclusively on the reception of textual content, future research would benefit from exploring how audiences respond to strategic narratives projected by moving images and videos. In a hybrid media ecology where young Russian speakers encounter news primarily through social media, the affective power of moving images diverges markedly from that of text, which often encourages a more critical and analytical response. Exploring the reception of visual and audiovisual material could provide deeper insights into how strategic narratives are interpreted beyond text alone.

Third, building on the insights gained from focus group interviews, future research would benefit from employing ethnographic methods to study the media habits of young Russian speakers and the practical implications of strategic narratives in their daily lives. It would also be interesting to study the relationship between Russian YouTubers and Russian-speaking youth in Latvia and investigate their role in creating audiences' lifeworld and perception of world events. This would be a fruitful area for future work, especially since young Russian speakers, both in and outside of Russia, increasingly turn to YouTube for information because of censorship and media regulation.

Throughout this thesis, I have strived to show how young Russian speakers are neither critically opposing strategic narratives nor uncritically taking them to heart. The reality is rather somewhere in between. On the one hand, participants agree that these issues indeed are topical and relevant problems in Latvia. On the other hand, opinions diverge on how to best solve them. In this study, my ambitions has not only been to disentangle the reception process of strategic narratives, but also to humanise the issues at stake and to illustrate more vividly the complexity of the feelings found among different voices of young Russian speakers in Latvia. I hope this research project will bring nuance to a situation where censorship, 'us versus them' thinking and polarisation increasingly are taking over public discourse.

References

- Aasland, A., & Fløtten, T. (2001). Ethnicity and Social Exclusion in Estonia and Latvia. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 53(7), 1023–1049.
- Abrams, K. M., Wang, Z., Song, Y. J., & Galindo-Gonzalez, S. (2015). Data Richness Trade-Offs Between Face-to-Face, Online Audiovisual, and Online Text-Only Focus Groups. *Social Science Computer Review*, 33(1), 80–96.
- Ahmed, S. (2004a). Collective Feelings: Or, the Impressions Left by Others. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 21(2), 25–42.
- Ahmed, S. (2004b). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2005). The Politics of Bad Feeling. *Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association Journal*, 1, 72–85.
- Alvesson, M., & Skoldberg, K. (2009). *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Andersen, K., Johansson, J., Johansson, B., & Shehata, A. (2022). Maintenance and Reformation of News Repertoires: A Latent Transition Analysis. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 99(1), 237–261.
- Andžāns, M. (2024). Societal Perceptions in Transition from a Borderland to a Frontline: Latvia's Latgale During the War in Ukraine. *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 29(SI).
- Archetti, C. (2013). *Understanding Terrorism in the Age of Global Media: A Communication Approach*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Archetti, C. (2015). Terrorism, Communication and New Media: Explaining Radicalization in the Digital Age. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9(1), 49–59.
- Archetti, C. (2017). Narrative Wars: Understanding Terrorism in the Era of Global Interconnectedness. In A. Miskimmon, B. O'Loughlin, & L. Roselle (Eds.), *Forging the World* (pp. 218–245). University of Michigan Press.
- Archetti, C. (2019). The unbearable thinness of strategic communication. In C. Bjola & J. Pamment (Eds.), *Countering online propaganda and extremism* (pp. 81–95). Routledge.
- Aristotle. (1997). *Poetics* (M. Heath, Trans.). Penguin Classics.
- Auers, D. (2015). *Comparative Politics and Government of the Baltic States*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bakir, V., Herring, E., Miller, D., & Robinson, P. (2019). Organized Persuasive Communication: A new conceptual framework for research on public relations, propaganda and promotional culture. *Critical Sociology*, 45(3), 311–328.
- Bamberg, M., & Georgakopoulou, A. (2008). Small stories as a new perspective in narrative and identity analysis. *Text & Talk*, 28(3), 377–396.
- Barbour, R. (2007). *Doing Focus Groups*. Sage Publications.
- Barthes, R., & L. Duisit. (1975). An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative. *New Literary History*, 6(2), 237–272.
- Belo, D. (2024). Enemies by kinship: Securitizing language and the Russian diaspora in escalated gray zone conflict. *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 30(1), 30–43.

- Bengtsson, S., & Johansson, S. (2024). *Navigating the News: Young People, Digital Culture and Everyday Life*. De Gruyter.
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Anchor.
- Bergmane, U. (2023, March 24). Seven Lessons from Latvia a Year After Russia's Invasion of Ukraine *Foreign Policy Research Institute*.
<https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/03/seven-lessons-from-latvia/>
- Bernays, E. L. (2004) [1928]. *Propaganda*. Ig Publishing.
- Bērziņa, I. (2018). The Narrative of “Information Warfare against Russia” in Russian Academic Discourse. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 17(2), 161–175.
- Bērziņa, I., Krūmiņš, G., Šiliņš, J., & Andžāns, M. (2023). History perceptions and national identity among Latvian youth: Entrapped between narratives of Latvia and Russia? *Nations and Nationalism*, 29(2), 700–717.
- Bilandzic, H. (2006). The Perception of Distance in the Cultivation Process: A Theoretical Consideration of the Relationship Between Television Content, Processing Experience, and Perceived Distance. *Communication Theory*, 16(3), 333–355.
- Bilandzic, H., & Busselle, R. (2013). Narrative persuasion. In J. P. Dillard, & L. Shen (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Persuasion: Developments in Theory and Practice* (2nd ed., pp. 200–219). Sage Publications.
- Birka, I. (2016). Expressed attachment to Russia and social integration: The case of young Russian speakers in Latvia, 2004–2010. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 47(2), 219–238.
- Blumler, J. G., & Katz, E. (1974). *The Uses of Mass Communications: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research*. Sage Publications.
- Bodrunova, S. S. (2021). Information disorder practices in/by contemporary Russia. In H. Tumber, & S. Waisbord (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism* (pp. 279–289). Routledge.
- Boje, D. M. (1991). The Storytelling Organization: A Study of Story Performance in an Office-Supply Firm. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 36(1), 106–126.
- Boje, D. M. (1995). Stories of the Storytelling Organization: A Postmodern Analysis of Disney as “Tamara-Land”. *Academy of Management Journal*, 38(4), 997–1035.
- Boje, D. M. (2008). *Storytelling organizations*. Sage Publications.
- Bolin, G. (2017). *Media Generations: Experience, identity and mediatised social change*. Routledge.
- Bolin, G., Kalmus, V., & Figueiras, R. (2023). Conducting Online Focus Group Interviews With Two Generations: Methodological Experiences and Reflections From the Pandemic Context. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22.
- Bolin, G., & Kunelius, R. (2023). The return of propaganda: Historical legacies and contemporary conceptualisations. *Nordic Journal of Media Studies*, 5(1), 1–16.
- Bonini, T., & Treré, E. (2024). *Algorithms of resistance: The everyday fight against platform power*. The MIT Press.
- Bos, L., Kruikemeier, S., & de Vreese, C. (2016). Nation Binding: How Public Service Broadcasting Mitigates Political Selective Exposure. *PLoS ONE*, 11(5), 1–11.
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40.
- Braddock, K., & Dillard, J. P. (2016). Meta-analytic evidence for the persuasive effect of narratives on beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. *Communication Monographs*, 83(4), 446–467.

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Breggin, B. (2014). Riga City Youth between Latvian and Russian. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 45(2), 169–186.
- Brendan, C. (2023, May 29). Russian State TV Is Running Out Of Ideas. *Newsweek*. <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-state-tv-viewership-ukraine-war-solo-vyov-skabeyeva-1802635>
- Brikše, I., Skudra, O., & Tjarve, R. (2002). Development of the Media in Latvia in the 1990s. In P. Vihalemm (Ed.), *Baltic Media in Transition* (pp. 65–102). Tartu University Press.
- Brinkmann, S. (2013). *Qualitative Interviewing*. Oxford University Press.
- Bruner, J. (1991). The Narrative Construction of Reality. *Critical Inquiry*, 18(1), 1–21.
- Burke, K. (1945). *A Grammar of Motives*. University of California Press.
- Burke, K. (1966). *Language As Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. University of California Press.
- Burke, K. (1969). *A Rhetoric of Motives*. University of California Press.
- Burr, V. (2015). *Social Constructionism*. Routledge.
- Busselle, R., & Bilandzic, H. (2009). Measuring Narrative Engagement. *Media Psychology*, 12(4), 321–347.
- Cara, O. (2010). The Acculturation of Russian-Speaking Adolescents in Latvia. *European Education*, 42(1), 8–36.
- Cavalcante, A. (2018). Affect, emotion, and media audiences: The case of resilient reception. *Media, Culture & Society*, 40(8), 1186–1201.
- Chaban, N., Heinrichs, P. S., Miskimmon, A., & O’Loughlin, B. (2021). Reimagining Europe? Youth Narratives and Perceptions in Ukraine and the Baltic States. *Demokratizatsiya*, 29(4), 281–301.
- Chaban, N., Zhabotyńska, S., & Knodt, M. (2023). What makes strategic narrative efficient: Ukraine on Russian e-news platforms. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 58(4), 419–440.
- Chakars, J., & Ekmanis, I. (2022). Echoes of the Past: Media and History in the Baltic Battlespace. In J. Chakars, & I. Ekmanis (Eds.), *Information Wars in the Baltic States: Russia’s Long Shadow* (pp. 11–34). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cherson, P., & Estes, K. W. (2023). Paradoxes of minority representation: A comparison of Russophone political attitudes in Estonia and Latvia. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 54(3), 581–599.
- Chernobrov, D., & Briant, E. L. (2022). Competing propagandas: How the United States and Russia represent mutual propaganda activities. *Politics*, 42(3), 393–409.
- Cheskin, A. (2012). Synthesis and Conflict: Russian-speakers’ Discursive Response to Latvia’s Nationalising State. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 64(2), 325–347.
- Cheskin, A. (2013). Exploring Russian-Speaking Identity from Below: The Case of Latvia. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 44(3), 287–312.
- Cheskin, A. (2015). Identity and Integration of Russian Speakers in the Baltic States: A Framework for Analysis. *Ethnopolitics*, 14(1), 72–93.
- Cheskin, A., & Kachuyevski, A. (2019). The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Post-Soviet Space: Language, Politics and Identity. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 71(1), 1–23.
- Claessen, E. (2021). The making of a narrative: The use of geopolitical othering in Russian strategic narratives during the Ukraine crisis. *Media, War & Conflict*, 175063522111029529.
- Clarke, C. (Ed.). (2023). *Understanding the Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania since 1991*. Hurst.

- Cohen, J. (2001). Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences With Media Characters. *Mass Communication and Society*, 4(3), 245–264.
- Colley, T. (2017). Is Britain a force for good? Investigating British citizens' narrative understanding of war. *Defence Studies*, 17(1), 1–22.
- Colley, T. (2020). Strategic Narratives and War Propaganda. In P. Baines, N. J. O'Shaughnessy, & N. Snow (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Propaganda* (pp. 38–54). Sage Publications.
- Coticchia, F., & Catanzaro, A. (2022). The fog of words: Assessing the problematic relationship between strategic narratives, (master) frames and ideology. *Media, War & Conflict*, 15(4), 427–449.
- Cotter, K., & Thorson, K. (2022). Judging Value in a Time of Information Cacophony: Young Adults, Social media, and the Messiness of do-it-Yourself Expertise. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 27(3), 629–647.
- Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2017). *The Mediated Construction of Reality*. Polity Press.
- Council of the European Union. (2022, March 2). EU imposes sanctions on state-owned outlets RT/Russia Today and Sputnik's broadcasting in the EU. *Consilium*. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-state-owned-outlets-rtrussia-today-and-sputnik-s-broadcasting-in-the-eu/>
- Crilley, R., & Chatterje-Doody, P. N. (2020). Emotions and war on YouTube: Affective investments in RT's visual narratives of the conflict in Syria. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 33(5), 1–21.
- Crilley, R., Manor, I., & Bjola, C. (2020). Visual narratives of global politics in the digital age: An introduction. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 33(5), 628–637.
- Crosby, J. M. (2022). *Audience 2.0: New Dynamics of Audience Reception in the Age of Social Media* (Doctoral thesis, Newcastle University). Newcastle University eTheses Repository. <http://theses.ncl.ac.uk/jspui/handle/10443/5648>
- Cull, N. J. (2019). *Public Diplomacy*. Polity Press.
- Czarniawska, B. (1997). *Narrating the Organization: Dramas of Institutional Identity*. University of Chicago Press.
- Czarniawska, B. (1998). *A Narrative Approach to Organization Studies*. Sage Publications.
- Czarniawska, B. (2004). *Narratives in Social Science Research*. Sage Publications.
- Dahlberg, L., Snickars, P., & Statens ljud- och bildarkiv (Eds.). (2008). *Berättande i olika medier*. Statens ljud- och bildarkiv.
- Darczewska, J., & Żochowski, P. (2015). Russophobia in the Kremlin's Strategy: A Weapon of Mass Destruction. *Point of View*, 56.
- Davis, C. H., & Vladica, F. (2010). Consumer Value and Modes of Media Reception: Audience Response to Ryan, a Computer-animated Psycho-realist Documentary and its Own Documentation in Alter Egos. *Palabra Clave - Revista de Comunicación*, 13(1), 13–30.
- De Fina, A., & Georgakopoulou, A. (2008). Analysing narratives as practices. *Qualitative Research*, 8(3), 379–387.
- de Graaf, A., Hoeken, H., Sanders, J., & Beentjes, J. W. J. (2012). Identification as a Mechanism of Narrative Persuasion. *Communication Research*, 39(6), 802–823.
- Denisa-Liepniece, S. (2022). Building or Banning? Russian-Language TV in Latvia. In J. Chakars, & I. Ekmanis (Eds.), *Information Wars in the Baltic States: Russia's Long Shadow* (pp. 93–120). Palgrave Macmillan.

- Deverell, E., Wagnsson, C., & Olsson, E.-K. (2020). Destruct, direct and suppress: Sputnik narratives on the Nordic countries. *The Journal of International Communication*, 27(1), 15–37.
- Dijk, T. A. van. (2008). *Discourse and Context: A Sociocognitive Approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dijk, T. A. van. (2009). *Society and Discourse: How Social Contexts Influence Text and Talk*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dimitriu, G., & de Graaf, B. (2016). Fighting the War at Home: Strategic Narratives, Elite Responsiveness, and the Dutch Mission in Afghanistan, 2006–2010. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12(1), 2–23.
- Dimitriu, G. (2012). Winning the story war: Strategic communication and the conflict in Afghanistan. *Public Relations Review*, 38(2), 195–207.
- Domańska, M. (2022). The Myth of the Great Patriotic War and Russia's Foreign Policy. In A. Legucka., & R. Kupieccki (Eds.), *Disinformation, Narratives and Memory Politics in Russia and Belarus* (pp. 108–120). Routledge.
- Döveling, K., & Konijn, E. A. (Eds.). (2010). *The Routledge Handbook of Emotions and Mass Media*. Routledge.
- Duvold, K., Berglund, S., & Ekman, J. (2019). *Political Culture in the Baltic States: Between National and European Integration*. Springer International Publishing.
- Edenborg, E. (2022). Disinformation and gendered boundarymaking: Nordic media audiences making sense of “Swedish decline.” *Cooperation and Conflict*, 57(4), 496–515.
- Edgerly, S. (2015). Red Media, Blue Media, and Purple Media: News Repertoires in the Colorful Media Landscape. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 59(1), 1–21.
- Edgerly, S., Vraga, E. K., Bode, L., Thorson, K., & Thorson, E. (2018). New Media, New Relationship to Participation? A Closer Look at Youth News Repertoires and Political Participation. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 95(1), 192–212.
- Edley, N., & Litosseliti, L. (2010). Contemplating Interviews and Focus Groups. In L. Litosseliti (Ed.), *Research Methods in Linguistics* (pp. 155–179). Cambridge University Press.
- Eglins-Eglitis, A., & Lusena-Ezera, I. (2016). From Industrial City to the Creative City: Development Policy Challenges and Liepaja Case. *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 39, 122–130.
- Ekman, J. (2024). In the Shadow of War: Public Opinion in the Baltic States, 2014 and 2021. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 15(2), 106–117.
- Ekmanis, I. (2019). Diversity in Daugavpils: Unpacking Identity and Cultural Engagement among Minority School Youth in Eastern Latvia. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 71(1), 71–96.
- Ekmanis, I. (2020). Why Isn't Latvia the “Next” Crimea? Reconsidering Ethnic Integration. *Orbis*, 64(3), 489–500.
- Elsawah, M., & Howard, P. N. (2020). “Anything that Causes Chaos”: The Organizational Behavior of Russia Today (RT). *Journal of Communication*, 70(5), 623–645.
- Eng.lsm.lv. (2019, October 18). No more “non-citizens” to be born in Latvia from 2020. *Latvian Public Broadcasting*. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/no-more-non-citizens-to-be-born-in-latvia-from-2020.a335553/>
- Eng.lsm.lv. (2020, September 17). George's ribbon to be banned in public events. *Latvian Public Broadcasting*. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/georges-ribbon-to-be-banned-in-public-events-in-latvia.a374700/>

- Eng.lsm.lv. (2021, September 17). LSM's Russian language news content rejigged and relaunched. *Latvian Public Broadcasting*. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/features/media-literacy/lsm-russian-language-news-content-rejigged-and-relaunched.a421741/>
- Eng.lsm.lv. (2022a, June 7). Switch to Latvian-only education to happen faster. *Latvian Public Broadcasting*. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/education/switch-to-latvian-only-education-to-happen-faster.a460353/>
- Eng.lsm.lv. (2022b, December 6). Russian independent TV Rain stripped of its license in Latvia. *Latvian Public Broadcasting*. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/features/media-literacy/russian-independent-tv-rain-stripped-of-its-license-in-latvia.a485628/>
- Eng.lsm.lv. (2023a, January 4). Media watchdog: Russian output dominates Latvia's information space. *Latvian Public Broadcasting*. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/features/media-literacy/media-watchdog-russian-output-dominates-latvias-information-space.a490055/>
- Eng.lsm.lv. (2023b, September 28). Saeima approves updated National Security concept for Latvia. *Latvian Public Broadcasting*. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/defense/28.09.2023-saeima-approves-updated-national-security-concept-for-latvia.a525735/>
- Eng.lsm.lv. (2024a, March 18). Former Putin propagandist prefers not to return to Russia. *Latvian Public Broadcasting*. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/features/media/18.03.2024-former-putin-propagandist-prefers-not-to-return-to-russia.a547067/>
- Eng.lsm.lv. (2024b, September 20). Russian to disappear from Latvian ATMs as language reset continues. *Latvian Public Broadcasting*. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/economy/banks/20.09.2024-russian-to-disappear-from-latvian-atms-as-language-reset-continues.a569545/>
- Entman, R. M. (2009). *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy*. University of Chicago Press.
- Feklyunina, V. (2012). Constructing Russophobia. In R. Taras (Ed.), *Russia's Identity in International Relations: Images, Perceptions, Misperceptions* (pp. 91–109). Taylor & Francis Group.
- Fisher, W. R. (1985). The Narrative Paradigm: An Elaboration. *Communication Monographs*, 52(4), 347–367.
- Fornäs, J. (2021). Symbols and narratives of Europe: Three tropes. *Punctum. International Journal of Semiotics*, 6(02), 85–100.
- Freedman, L. (2006). Networks, culture and narratives. *The Adelphi Papers*, 45(379), 11–26.
- Fridrichová, K. (2023). Mugged by reality: Russia's strategic narratives and the war in Ukraine. *Defense & Security Analysis*, 39(3) 281–295.
- Gabriel, Y. (1995). The Unmanaged Organization: Stories, Fantasies and Subjectivity. *Organization Studies*, 16(3), 477–501.
- Gabriel, Y. (2000). *Storytelling in Organizations: Facts, Fictions, and Fantasies*. Oxford University Press.
- Gackowski, T., & Brylska, K. (2022). 'Machiavellian Russia' in the Crimean conflict: Clarification of strategic narratives analysis method. *Journalism*, 23(4), 773–788.
- Geers, S. (2020). News Consumption across Media Platforms and Content: A Typology of Young News Users. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 84(1), 332–354.
- Gergen, M. M., & Gergen, K. J. (2006). Narratives in action. *Narrative Inquiry*, 16(1), 112–121.

- Gorelov, D. (2020). The Role of 9 May Commemorations in the Discursive Construction of Russophone Identity in Estonia. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 72(1), 55–79.
- Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. (2000). The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(5), 701–721.
- Greimas, A. J. (1983). *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Grigas, A. (2016). *Beyond Crimea: The New Russian Empire*. Yale University Press.
- Grigor, I. (2020). *Weaponized News: Russian Television, Strategic Narratives and Conflict Reporting* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Helsinki). Helda Digital Repository. <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/320154>
- Grigor [Khaldarova], I., & Pantti, M. (2021). Visual images as affective anchors: Strategic narratives in Russia’s Channel One coverage of the Syrian and Ukrainian conflicts. *Russian Journal of Communication*, 13(2), 140–162.
- Groot Kormelink, T., & Klein Gunnewiek, A. (2022). From “Far Away” to “Shock” to “Fatigue” to “Back to Normal”: How Young People Experienced News During the First Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journalism Studies*, 23(5–6), 669–686.
- Guest, G., Namey, E., Taylor, J., Eley, N., & McKenna, K. (2017). Comparing focus groups and individual interviews: Findings from a randomized study. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 20(6), 693–708.
- Hagström, L., & Gustafsson, K. (2019). Narrative power: How storytelling shapes East Asian international politics. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32(4), 387–406.
- Hagström, L., & Gustafsson, K. (2021). The limitations of strategic narratives: The Sino-American struggle over the meaning of COVID-19. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 42(4), 415–449.
- Hall, S. (1993). *Encoding/Decoding*. In S. During (Ed.), *Cultural Studies Reader* (pp. 96–98). Routledge.
- Hansson, S., Madisson, M.-L., & Ventsel, A. (2023). Discourses of blame in strategic narratives: The case of Russia’s 5G stories. *European Security*, 32(1), 62–84.
- Hasebrink, U. (2012). Comparing Media Use and Reception. In F. Esser, & T. Hanitzsch (Eds.), *The Handbook of Comparative Communication Research* (pp. 382–399). Routledge.
- Hasebrink, U., & Domeyer, H. (2012). Media repertoires as patterns of behaviour and as meaningful practices: A multimethod approach to media use in converging media environments. *Participations. Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 9(2), 757–779.
- Hasebrink, U., & Popp, J. (2006). Media repertoires as a result of selective media use. A conceptual approach to the analysis of patterns of exposure. *Communications*, 31(3), 369–387.
- Hepp, A. (2020). *Deep Mediatization*. Routledge.
- Herberga, L. (2023). *How to be many: Understanding difference and disagreement among young Russian speakers in Latvia* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Bristol). University of Bristol Research Repository. <https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/how-to-be-many>
- Hinck, R. S., Kluver, R., & Cooley, S. (2018). Russia re-envisioning the world: Strategic narratives in Russian broadcast and news media during 2015. *Russian Journal of Communication*, 10(1), 21–37.
- Hiršs, M. (2016). *The Extent of Russia’s Influence in Latvia*. (CSSR Working Paper Series). National Defence Academy of Latvia, Center for Security and Strategic Research.

- Hogan-Brun, G. (2006). At the interface of language ideology and practice: The public discourse surrounding the 2004 education reform in Latvia. *Language Policy*, 5(3), 315–335.
- Hogan-Brun, G. (2007). Language-in-education across the Baltic: Policies, practices and challenges. *Comparative Education*, 43(4), 553–570.
- Holland, K., Warwick Blood, R., & Thomas, S. (2015). Viewing *The Biggest Loser*: Modes of reception and reflexivity among obese people. *Social Semiotics*, 25(1), 16–32.
- Hollander, J. A. (2004). The Social Contexts of Focus Groups. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 33(5), 602–637.
- Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (1995). *The Active Interview*. Sage Publications.
- Horsdal, M. (2016). The narrative interview – method, theory and ethics: Unfolding a life. In I. Goodson., A. Antikainen., P. Sikes, & M. Andrews (Eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook on Narrative and Life History* (pp. 260–269). Routledge.
- Hoyle, A., Powell, T., Doosje, B., van den Berg, H., & Wagnsson, C. (2024). Weapons of mass division: *Sputnik Latvia*'s Russophobia narratives and testing the rejection-identification model in Russian speakers in Latvia. *Political Psychology* 45(4), 753–772.
- Hoyle, A., van den Berg, H., Doosje, B., & Kitzen, M. (2021). Grey matters: Advancing a psychological effects-based approach to countering malign information influence. *New Perspectives*, 29(2), 144–164.
- Hoyle, A., van den Berg, H., Doosje, B., & Kitzen, M. (2023). Portrait of liberal chaos: RT's antagonistic strategic narration about the Netherlands. *Media, War & Conflict*, 16(2), 209–227.
- Hoyle, A., Wagnsson, C., Powell, T. E., van den Berg, H., & Doosje, B. (2024). Life through grey-tinted glasses: How do audiences in Latvia psychologically respond to Sputnik Latvia's destruction narratives of a failed Latvia? *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 40(1), 1–18.
- Hudson, V. (2015). 'Forced to Friendship'? Russian (Mis-)Understandings of Soft Power and the Implications for Audience Attraction in Ukraine. *Politics*, 35(3–4), 330–346.
- Ijabs, I. (2016). After the Referendum: Militant Democracy and Nation-Building in Latvia. *East European Politics and Societies*, 30(2), 288–314.
- Jastramskis, D., Rožukalne, A., & Jõesaar, A. (2017). Media Concentration in the Baltic States (2000–2014). *Information & Media*, 77, 26–48.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. NYU Press.
- Jõesaar, A., Rožukalne, A., & Jastramskis, D. (2022). Trust in public service media in the Baltic states. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 53(4), 587–611.
- Juzefovičs, J. (2022). Making Sense of Public Media in Times of Geo-Political Crisis: Latvian Public Media and Their Ethno-Linguistic Majority and Minority Audiences. In J. Chakars & I. Ekmanis (Eds.), *Information Wars in the Baltic States: Russia's Long Shadow* (pp. 55–79). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Juzefovičs, J., & Vihalemm, T. (2020). Keeping channels open or screening out? The digital practices of Baltic Russian-speakers during the Russia-Ukraine conflict. *Russian Journal of Communication*, 12(3), 262–283.
- Kachuyevski, A. (2017). The “Russian World” and the Securitization of Identity Boundaries in Latvia. In A. Makarychev, & A. Yatsyk (Eds.), *Borders in the Baltic Sea Region: Suturing the Ruptures* (pp. 227–247). Palgrave Macmillan.

- Kaprāns, M., & Juzefovičs, J. (2020). Reconsidering media-centrism: Latvia's Russian-speaking audiences in light of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. In M. Wijermars, & K. Lehtisaari (Eds.), *Freedom of Expression in Russia's New Mediasphere* (pp. 159–185). Routledge.
- Kaprāns, M., & Mieriņa, I. (2019a). *Ideological Polarization in Baltic Societies. A Cross-National Survey Report*. Rīga: Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, University of Latvia.
- Kaprāns, M., & Mieriņa, I. (2019b). Minority Reconsidered: Towards a Typology of Latvia's Russophone Identity. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 71(1), 24–47.
- Karklins, R. (2021). Integration in Latvia: A success story? *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 52(3), 455–470.
- Kascian, K., Denisenko, V., & Matonytė, I. (2024). Baltic States' EU membership: Discursive search for (and failure to obtain) farewell from Russia. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 1–16.
- Kasekamp, A. (2010). *A History of the Baltic states*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kasekamp, A. (2018). Are the Baltic States Next?: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In A. F. Rasmussen & A.-S. Dahl (Eds.), *Strategic Challenges in the Baltic Sea Region* (pp. 61–72). Georgetown University Press.
- Khaldarova, I. (2021). Brother or 'Other'? Transformation of strategic narratives in Russian television news during the Ukrainian crisis. *Media, War & Conflict*, 14(1), 3–20.
- Kitzinger, J. (1994). The methodology of Focus Groups: The importance of interaction between research participants. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 16(1), 103–121.
- Kitzinger, J. (1995). Introducing Focus Groups. *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, 311(7000), 299–302.
- Klyueva, A. (2017). *Strategic Narratives of Public Diplomacy and the Enactment of Soft Power: An Exploratory Study* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Oklahoma). <https://shareok.org/items/6bf77477-e9eb-4047-8c0f-51f57654f65f>
- Kolstø, P. (2016). Symbol of the War — But Which One? The St George Ribbon in Russian Nation-Building. *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 94(4), 660–701.
- Korenyuk, M., & Goodman, J. (2022, March 4). Ukraine war: “My city's being shelled, but mum won't believe me.” *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60600487>
- Kosmarskaya, N. (2011). Russia and Post-Soviet “Russian Diaspora”: Contrasting Visions, Conflicting Projects. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 17(1), 54–74.
- Kott, M., & Smith, D. J. (2020). *Latvia A Work in Progress? – 100 Years of State- and Nation-Building*. Columbia University Press.
- Kremlin. (2008, January 12). *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*. President of Russia. <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/4116>
- Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2015). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Krumm, R., Šukevičs, K., & Zariņš, T. (2023). Under Pressure: An Analysis of the Russian-Speaking Minority in Latvia. *Friedrich Ebert Foundation*.
- Ksiazek, T. B., Kim, S. J., & Malthouse, E. C. (2019). Television News Repertoires, Exposure Diversity, and Voting Behavior in the 2016 U.S. Election. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 96(4), 1120–1144.
- Kuczyńska-Zonik, A. (2023). Silent Protesters or Acceptors? The Reaction of the Russian-speakers to the Removal of the Soviet Monuments in Latvia and Estonia after Russia's Full-scale Invasion of Ukraine*. *Politologija*, 112(4), 16–43.

- Kudors, A. (2014). Russian Soft Power and Non-Military Influence: The View from Latvia. In M. Winnerstig (Ed.), *Tools of Destabilization. Russian Soft Power and Non-Military Influence in the Baltic States* (pp. 73–77). Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI).
- Kudors, A. (2023). *Russia and Latvia: A Case of Sharp Power*. Routledge.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Sage Publications.
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Labov, W., & Waletzky, J. (1967). Narrative Analysis. Oral versions of personal experience. In J. Helm (Ed.) *Essays on the verbal and visual arts* (pp. 12–44). University of Washington Press.
- Lambert, S. D., & Loiselle, C. G. (2008). Combining individual interviews and focus groups to enhance data richness. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 62(2), 228–237.
- Lasswell, H. D. (1927). The Theory of Political Propaganda. *The American Political Science Review*, 21(3), 627–631.
- Leask, J., Hawe, P., & Chapman, S. (2001). Focus group composition: A comparison between natural and constructed groups. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 25(2), 152–154.
- Liebes, T., & Katz, E. (1986). Patterns of Involvement in Television Fiction: A Comparative Analysis. *European Journal of Communication*, 1(2), 151–171.
- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (Eds.). (2017). *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*. (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Lippmann, W. (1965). *Public opinion*. Free press.
- Lisenkov, A., & Kugel, M. (2021, October 7). Не похожи ни на родителей, ни на латышских сверстников. Русскоязычная молодежь Латвии за либеральные свободы, ценности ЕС и НАТО — исследование «Спектра» и SKDS [They do not look like either their parents or their Latvian peers. Russian-speaking youth of Latvia for liberal freedoms, EU and NATO values – Study by Spektr and SKDS]. *Cнекмп-Пресс*. <https://spektr.press/ne-pohozhi-ni-naroditelej-ni-na-latyshskih-sverstnikov-russkoyazychnaya-molodezh-latvii-zaliberalnye-svobody-cennosti-es-i-nato-issledovanie-spektra-i-skds/>
- Livingston, S., & Nassetta, J. (2018). Framing and Strategic Narratives: Synthesis and Analytical Framework. *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 38(2), 101–110.
- Livingstone, S. (2013). The Participation Paradigm in Audience Research. *The Communication Review*, 16(1–2), 21–30.
- Loader, M., Hearne, S., & Kott, M. (2022). *Defining Latvia: Recent Explorations in History, Culture, and Politics*. Central European University Press.
- Lumans, V. O. (2006). *Latvia in World War II*. Fordham University Press.
- Lundby, K. (Ed.). (2008). *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories: Self-representations in New Media*. Peter Lang.
- Lundby, K. (2009). The Matrices of Digital Storytelling. In J. Hartley, & K. McWilliam (Eds.), *Story Circle: Digital Storytelling around the World* (pp. 176–187). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Lundby, K. (2014). Mediatized Stories in Mediatized Worlds. In A. Hepp, & F. Krotz (Eds.), *Mediatized Worlds: Culture and Society in a Media Age* (pp. 19–37). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lünenborg, M., & Maier, T. (2018). The Turn to Affect and Emotion in Media Studies. *Media and Communication*, 6(3), 1–4.
- Lünenborg, M., & Röttger-Rössler, B. (2024). *Affective Formation of Publics: Places, Networks, and Media*. Routledge.

- Lunt, P., & Livingstone, S. (1996). Rethinking the Focus Group in Media and Communications Research. *Journal of Communication*, 46(2), 79–98.
- Maccoby, E. E., & Maccoby, N. (1954). The interview: A tool of social science. In G. Lindzey (Ed.), *Handbook of Social Psychology* (pp. 449–487). Addison-Wesley.
- Massumi, B. (2002). *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Duke University Press.
- Mathieu, D. (2015). The Continued Relevance of Reception Analysis in the Age of Social Media. *Tripodos*, 36, 13–34.
- Mathieu, D., & Pavličková, T. (2017). Cross-media within the Facebook newsfeed: The role of the reader in cross-media uses. *Convergence*, 23(4), 425–438.
- McGlynn, J. (2023). *Memory Makers: The Politics of the Past in Putin's Russia*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Michel, L. (1999). Combining Focus Groups and Interviews: Telling How It Is; Telling How It Feels. In Barbour, R. S., & J. Kitzinger (Eds.), *Developing Focus Group Research* (pp. 36–46). Sage Publications
- Michelle, C. (2007). Modes of Reception: A Consolidated Analytical Framework. *Communication Review*, 10(3), 181–222.
- Michelle, C., Davis, C. H., & Vladica, F. (2012). Understanding Variation in Audience Engagement and Response: An Application of the Composite Model to Receptions of Avatar (2009). *The Communication Review*, 15(2), 106–143.
- Mierīņa, I. (2024, June 26). The War in Ukraine and Latvia's Russian-speaking Community. *ZOiS Spotlight*. <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/the-war-in-ukraine-and-latvias-russian-speaking-community>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Latvia. (2023). *Society integration in Latvia | Ārlietu ministrija*. <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/society-integration-latvia>
- Miskimmon, A., & O'Loughlin, B. (2019). Narratives of the EU in Israel/Palestine: Narrative “stickiness” and the formation of expectations. *European Security*, 28(3), 268–283.
- Miskimmon, A., & O'Loughlin, B. (2021). Diverging Horizons? How Citizens and Young Elites Narrate Foreign Policy in Ukraine and the Baltic States. *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 29(4) 329–351.
- Miskimmon, A., O'Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2013). *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*. Routledge.
- Miskimmon, A., O'Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2017). Introduction. In A. Miskimmon, B. O'Loughlin, & L. Roselle (Eds.), *Forging the World* (pp. 1–22). University of Michigan Press.
- Morley, D. (1980). *Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding*. British Film Inst.
- Muižnieks, N. (Ed.). (2010). *How Integrated is Latvian Society? An Audit of Achievements, Failures and Challenges*. University of Latvia Press.
- Neundorf, A., Smets, K., & García-Albacete, G. M. (2013). Homemade citizens: The development of political interest during adolescence and young adulthood. *Acta Politica*, 48(1), 92–116.
- Nightingale, V. (Ed.). (2013). *The Handbook of Media Audiences*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Ochs, E., & Capps, L. (1996). Narrating the Self. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 25, 19–43.
- OECD. (2022). *Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators*. OECD Publishing. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2022_3197152b-en.html
- O'Loughlin, B., Miskimmon, A., & Roselle, L. (2017). Strategic Narratives: Methods and Ethics. In B. O'Loughlin, A. Miskimmon, & L. Roselle (Eds.), *Forging the World* (pp. 23–55). University of Michigan Press.

- Onken, E.-C. (2007). The Baltic States and Moscow's 9 May Commemoration: Analysing Memory Politics in Europe. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 59(1), 23–46.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2014). *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2016). Affective publics and structures of storytelling: Sentiment, events and mediality. *Information, Communication & Society*, 19(3), 307–324.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2019). Forget Messiahs. *Social Media + Society*, 5(3), 1–3.
- Patsiurko, N., & Wallace, C. (2014). Citizenship, Europe and ethnic boundary making among Russian minorities in Latvia and Lithuania. *Migration Letters*, 11(2), 187–205.
- Persson, G. (2014). Russian Influence and Soft Power in the Baltic States: The View from Moscow. In M. Winnerstig (Ed.), *Tools of Destabilization. Russian Soft Power and Non-Military Influence in the Baltic States* (pp. 17–29). Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI).
- Peters, C., & Schröder, K. C. (2018). Beyond the Here and Now of News Audiences: A Process-Based Framework for Investigating News Repertoires. *Journal of Communication*, 68(6), 1079–1103.
- Peters, C., Schröder, K. C., Lehaff, J., & Vulpius, J. (2022). News as They Know It: Young Adults' Information Repertoires in the Digital Media Landscape. *Digital Journalism*, 10(1), 62–86.
- Pieper, M. (2020). Russkiy Mir: The Geopolitics of Russian Compatriots Abroad. *Geopolitics*, 25(3), 756–779.
- Plakans, A. (1995). *The Latvians: A Short History*. Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University.
- Plakans, A. (2011). *A Concise History of the Baltic States*. Cambridge University Press.
- President of Russia. (2013, December 13). *Указ о мерах по повышению эффективности деятельности государственных СМИ [Decree on measures to improve the performance of state-run media]*. Президент России. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19805>
- Propp, V. J. (1968) [1928]. *Morphology of the folktale*. (2nd ed.) Publications of the American folklore society. Bibliographical and special series 9. (L. Scott, Trans.). University of Texas Press.
- Proudfoot, K. (2023). Inductive/Deductive Hybrid Thematic Analysis in Mixed Methods Research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 17(3), 308–326.
- Pupcenoks, J., & Seltzer, E. J. (2021). Russian Strategic Narratives on R2P in the 'Near Abroad.' *Nationalities Papers*, 49(4), 1–19.
- Radway, J. A. (1991). *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. The University of North Carolina Press.
- Ramsay, G., & Robertshaw, S. (2018). Weaponising news: RT, Sputnik and targeted disinformation. *The Policy Institute*, King's College London. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/research-analysis/weaponising-news>
- Rawnsley, G. D. (2015). To Know Us is to Love Us: Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting in Contemporary Russia and China. *Politics*, 35(3–4), 273–286.
- Reporters Without Borders. (n.d.). *Latvia | RSF*. Retrieved November 29, 2024, from <https://rsf.org/en/country/latvia>
- Reporters Without Borders. (2023, October 9). RSF and its partners are extremely concerned by Latvian proposal to ban Russian-language content on public service media. *RSF*. <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-and-its-partners-are-extremely-concerned-latvian-proposal-ban-russian-language-content-public>
- Ringsmose, J., & Børgesen, B. K. (2011). Shaping public attitudes towards the deployment of military power: NATO, Afghanistan and the use of strategic narratives. *European Security*, 20(4), 505–528.

- Rodden, J. (2008). How Do Stories Convince Us? Notes towards a Rhetoric of Narrative. *College Literature*, 35(1), 148–173.
- Rönngren, E. (2022). Cancelling Russia The Situation for Russian Speakers in Latvia following the invasion of Ukraine. *Baltic Worlds*, 3–4, 22–27.
- Roselle, L. (2017). Strategic Narratives and Great Power Identity. In L. Roselle, A. Miskimmon, & B. O’Loughlin (Eds.), *Forging the World* (pp. 56–84). University of Michigan Press.
- Roselle, L., Miskimmon, A., & O’Loughlin, B. (2014). Strategic narrative: A new means to understand soft power: *Media, War & Conflict*, 7(1), 70–84.
- Rosen, J. (2006, June 27). The People Formerly Known as the Audience. *PressThink*. http://archive.pressthink.org/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html
- Rožukalne, A. (2012). Significance of hidden advertising of the media business models in Latvia. *Media Transformations*, 8, 126–150.
- Rožukalne, A. (2013). Editorial independence in the Latvian news media: Ownership interests and journalistic compromises. *Media Transformations*, 9, 80–101.
- Rožukalne, A. (2020). Self-censorship in Latvian journalism: A research note. *European Journal of Communication*, 35(1), 60–64.
- Rožukalne, A., Kleinberga, V., Tifentāle, A., & Strode, I. (2022). What Is the Flag We Rally Around? Trust in Information Sources at the Outset of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Latvia. *Social Sciences*, 11(3).
- Ryan, M.-L. (2004). *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Ryan, M.-L. (2022). *A New Anatomy of Storyworlds: What Is, What If, As If*. The Ohio State University Press.
- Ryan, M.-L., Thon, J.-N., Matz, J. E., & Herman, D. (Eds.). (2014). *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Ryazanova-Clarke, L. (2017). From commodification to weaponization: The Russian language as ‘pride’ and ‘profit’ in Russia’s transnational discourses. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 20(4), 443–456.
- Sacks, H., Schegloff, E. A., & Jefferson, G. (1974). A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation. *Language*, 50(4), 696–735.
- Saldaña, J. (2015). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Sazonov, V., & Mölder, H. (2020). The Kremlin’s Strategic Narratives on the Baltic States During the COVID-19 crisis*. *Kwartalnik “Bellona,”* 703(4), 1–10.
- Sazonov, V., Pakhomenko, S., & Kopytin, I. (2021). Between History and Propaganda: Estonia and Latvia in Russian Historical Narratives. In H. Mölder, V. Sazonov, A. Chochia, & T. Kerikmäe (Eds.), *The Russian Federation in Global Knowledge Warfare: Influence Operations in Europe and Its Neighbourhood* (pp. 397–423). Springer International Publishing.
- Schmitt, O. (2018). When are strategic narratives effective? The shaping of political discourse through the interaction between political myths and strategic narratives. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 39(4), 487–511.
- Schröder, K. C. (2019). Audience Reception Research in a Post-broadcasting Digital Age. *Television & New Media*, 20(2), 155–169.
- Schröder, K. C., & Steeg Larsen, B. (2010). The Shifting Cross-Media News Landscape. *Journalism Studies*, 11(4), 524–534.
- Seigworth, G. J., & Gregg, M. (2010). An Inventory of Shimmers. In G. J. Seigworth, & M. Gregg (Eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader* (pp. 3–25). Duke University Press.
- Silverman, D. (2011). *Interpreting Qualitative Data* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.

- Silverstone, R. (1981). *The Message of Television: Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Culture*. Heinemann Educational.
- Silverstone, R. (1983). The right to speak; on a poetic for television documentary. *Media, Culture & Society*, 5(2), 137–154.
- Sim, J., & Waterfield, J. (2019). Focus group methodology: Some ethical challenges. *Quality & Quantity*, 53(6), 3003–3022.
- Skovsgaard, M., & Andersen, K. (2020). Conceptualizing News Avoidance: Towards a Shared Understanding of Different Causes and Potential Solutions. *Journalism Studies*, 21(4), 459–476.
- Smets, K. (2012). Connecting Islam and film culture: The reception of *The Message (Ar Risalah)* among the Moroccan diaspora. *Participations: International Journal of Audience Research*. 9(1), 68–94.
- Smets, K. (2014). “Turkish Rambo” Going Transnational: The Polarized Reception of Mainstream Political Cinema among the Turkish Diaspora in Belgium. *Turkish Studies*, 15(1), 12–28.
- Smith, M. W. (1995). Ethics in Focus Groups: A Few Concerns. *Qualitative Health Research*, 5(4), 478–486.
- Snow, N., G., Jowett, & V. O’Donnell. (2024). *Propaganda & Persuasion* (8th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Sproule, J. M. (1997). *Propaganda and Democracy: The American Experience of Media and Mass Persuasion*. Cambridge University Press.
- Stewart, D. W., Shamdasani, P. N., & Rook, D. W. (Eds.). (2007). *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Strömbäck, J. (2017). News Seekers, News Avoiders, and the Mobilizing Effects of Election Campaigns: Comparing Election Campaigns for the National and the European Parliaments. *International Journal of Communication*, 11, 237–258.
- Strömbäck, J., Falasca, K., & Kruike-meier, S. (2018). The Mix of Media Use Matters: Investigating the Effects of Individual News Repertoires on Offline and Online Political Participation. *Political Communication*, 35(3), 413–432.
- Struberga, S. (2023). The Russian-speaking community in Latvia: On whose side in times of war? In A. Kuczyńska-Zonik & T. Stepniewski (Eds.), *The Baltic states and new security challenges in flux* (Vol. 2023, pp. 61–78). Institute of Central Europe.
- Strukov, V. (2021). Digital Journalism: Toward a Theory of Journalistic Practice in the Twenty-First Century. In D. Gritsenko, M. Wijermars, & M. Kopotev (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Digital Russia Studies* (pp. 155–170). Springer International Publishing.
- Suslov, M. (2018). “Russian World” Concept: Post-Soviet Geopolitical Ideology and the Logic of “Spheres of Influence.” *Geopolitics*, 23(2), 330–353.
- Swart, J. (2023). Tactics of news literacy: How young people access, evaluate, and engage with news on social media. *New Media & Society*, 25(3), 505–521.
- Swart, J., Peters, C., & Broersma, M. (2017). Navigating cross-media news use. *Journalism Studies*, 18(11), 1343–1362.
- Swedish Research Council. (2017). *Good research practice*. Swedish Research Council.
- Szostek, J. (2017a). News Consumption and Anti-Western Narratives in Russia: A Case Study of University Students. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 69(2), 284–302.
- Szostek, J. (2017b). Nothing Is True? The Credibility of News and Conflicting Narratives during “Information War” in Ukraine: *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 23(1), 116–135.
- Szostek, J. (2017c). The Power and Limits of Russia’s Strategic Narrative in Ukraine: The Role of Linkage. *Perspectives on Politics*, 15(2), 379–395.

- Szostek, J. (2018). News media repertoires and strategic narrative reception: A paradox of dis/belief in authoritarian Russia. *New Media & Society*, 20(1), 68–87.
- Szostek, J. (2020). What Happens to Public Diplomacy During Information War? Critical Reflections on the Conceptual Framing of International Communication. *International Journal of Communication*, 14, 2728–2748.
- Tager, M., & Matthee, H. (2014). Dexter: Gratuitous violence or the vicarious experience of justice? Perceptions of selected South African viewers. *Communication*, 40(1), 20–33.
- Taylor, P. M. (2003). *Munitions of the Mind*. Manchester University Press.
- The Embassy of the Republic of Latvia to the United States of America. (2014). *History of Latvia: A brief synopsis*. <https://www2.mfa.gov.lv/en/usa/culture/history-of-latvia-a-brief-synopsis>
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2016, November 30). *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016)*. http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2023, March 31). *The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*. https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/
- Tkačenko, V. (2023). Dual Minorities: Narratives of Russian-Speaking Youth of the Latvian LGBTQ+ Community. In V. Zelče (Ed.), *Media and Society, 2022. Proceedings of Scientific Papers* (pp. 124–133). University of Latvia Press.
- Todorov, T. (1990). *Genres in Discourse*. (C. Porter, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.
- Tolz, V., & Teper, Y. (2018). Broadcasting agitainment: A new media strategy of Putin's third presidency. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 34(4), 213–227.
- Tuttas, C. A. (2015). Lessons Learned Using Web Conference Technology for Online Focus Group Interviews. *Qualitative Health Research*, 25(1), 122–133.
- van Noort, C., & Chatterje-Dooddy, P. N. (2021). Visualizing China's Belt and Road Initiative on RT (Russia Today): From infrastructural project to human development. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 64(23), 431–459.
- Vandenplas, R., & Picone, I. (2021). Media as the great emancipators? Exploring relations between media repertoires and cultural participation in Flanders. *Convergence*, 27(5), 1439–1461.
- Vandenplas, R., Truyens, P., Vis, S., & Picone, I. (2021). Tuning Out the News. A Cross-Media Perspective on News Avoidance Practices of Young News Users in Flanders During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journalism Studies*, 22(16), 2197–2217.
- Ventsel, A., Hansson, S., Madisson, M.-L., & Sazonov, V. (2021). Discourse of fear in strategic narratives: The case of Russia's Zapad war games. *Media, War & Conflict*, 14(1), 21–39.
- Vihalemm, T., & Juzefovičs, J. (2020). Sense-making of conflicting political news among Baltic Russian-speaking audiences. *National Identities*, 23(3), 253–275.
- Vihalemm, T., & Juzefovičs, J. (2022). Navigating Conflicts through the Media: The Sceptical and Self-Responsible Repertoires of Baltic Russian-Speakers. *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, 36(2), 423–445.
- Vihalemm, T., & Juzefovičs, J. (2023). 'They say we are all zombies': Rethinking the role of audiences in a mediatized international conflict. *Global Media and Communication*, 19(1), 3–28.

- Vihalemm, T., Juzefovičs, J., & Leppik, M. (2019). Identity and Media-use Strategies of the Estonian and Latvian Russian-speaking Populations Amid Political Crisis. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 71(1), 48–70.
- Vittadini, N., Siibak, A., Reifova, I., & Bilandzic, H. (2013). Generations and Media: The Social Construction of Generational Identity and Differences. In N. Carpentier., K. C. Schröder, & L. Hallett (Eds.), *Audience Transformations. Shifting Audience Positions in Late Modernity* (pp. 65–81). Routledge.
- Vohra, A. (2023, November 27). Latvia Is Going on Offense Against Russian Culture. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/21/latvia-is-going-on-offense-against-russian-culture/>
- Volkovs, V., & Kurczewski, J. (2013). *The Latvians, Russians and Poles of Present-Day Daugavpils: Integration, Acculturation and Historical Reconciliation*. Zinātne.
- Vulpus, J., Lehaff, J., Schröder, K. C., & Peters, C. (2023). Exploring changing news repertoires: Towards a typology. *Journalism*, 24(1), 78–100.
- Wagnsson, C. (2022). The paperboys of Russian messaging: RT/Sputnik audiences as vehicles for malign information influence. *Information, Communication & Society*, 1–19.
- Wagnsson, C., & Barzanje, C. (2021). A framework for analysing antagonistic narrative strategies: A Russian tale of Swedish decline. *Media, War & Conflict*, 14(2), 239–257.
- Wagnsson, C., & Lundström, M. (2023). Ringing true? The persuasiveness of Russian strategic narratives. *Media, War & Conflict*, 16(3), 383–400.
- Wanless, A., & Pamment, J. (2019). How Do You Define a Problem Like Influence? *Journal of Information Warfare*, 18(3), 1–14.
- Warr, D. J. (2005). “It was fun... but we don’t usually talk about these things”: Analyzing Sociable Interaction in Focus Groups. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11(2), 200–225.
- White, H. (1973). Interpretation in History. *New Literary History*, 4(2), 281–314.
- Williams, R. (1961). *The Long Revolution*. Columbia University Press.
- Williams, R. (2015). Structures of Feeling. In D. Sharma, & F. Tygstrup (Eds.), *Structures of Feeling: Affectivity and the Study of Culture* (pp. 20–26). De Gruyter.
- Wright, K., Scott, M., & Bunce, M. (2020). Soft Power, Hard News: How Journalists at State-Funded Transnational Media Legitimize Their Work. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 25(4), 607–631.
- Ytre-Arne, B., & Moe, H. (2021). Doomscrolling, Monitoring and Avoiding: News Use in COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown. *Journalism Studies*, 22(13), 1739–1755.
- Yuan, E. (2011). News Consumption Across Multiple Media Platforms. *Information, Communication & Society*, 14(7), 998–1016.
- Zalipour, A., Michelle, C., & Hardy, A. (2014). Modes of Engagement Among Diasporic Audiences of Asian New Zealand Film. *The Communication Review*, 17(4), 311–335.
- Zelče, V. (2018). The Transformation of ‘Holiday’ in Post-Soviet Space: Celebrating Soviet Victory Day in Latvia. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70(3), 388–420.

Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Press statements

- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2019a, October 3). *Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, October 3, 2019* [Press briefing]. Retrieved from https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1471508/
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2019b, November 1). *Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova on the sidelines of the International Public Diplomacy Forum, Dialogue on the Volga: Peace and Mutual Understanding in the 21st Century, Volgograd, November 1, 2019* [Press briefing]. Retrieved from https://mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3882176
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2019c, November 8). *Comment by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova on the dismantling of a monument to Soviet submariners in Riga* [Commentary]. Retrieved from https://mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3891703
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2019d, November 21). *Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, November 21, 2019* [Press briefing]. Retrieved from https://mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3908615
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2020a, March 19). *Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, March 19, 2020* [Press briefing]. Retrieved from https://mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cknonkje02bw/content/id/4090761
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2020b, April 29). *Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, April 29, 2020* [Press briefing]. Retrieved from https://mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cknonkje02bw/content/id/4108704
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2020c, May 21). *Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, May 21, 2020* [Press briefing]. Retrieved from https://mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cknonkje02bw/content/id/4134720
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2020d, July 2). *Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, July 2, 2020* [Press briefing]. Retrieved from https://mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cknonkje02bw/content/id/4205557
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2020e, July 22). *Comment by the Information and Press Department on the 80th anniversary of the incorporation of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia into the Soviet Union, June 9, 2020* [Commentary]. Retrieved from https://mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4252119
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2020f, August 20). *Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, August 20, 2020* [Press briefing]. Retrieved from https://mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4293620
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2020g, December 10). *Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, December 10, 2020* [Press briefing]. Retrieved from https://mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cknonkje02bw/content/id/4478713
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2020h, December 16). *Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow,*

- December 16, 2020 [Press briefing]. Retrieved from https://mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4488288
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2020i, 24 December). *Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, December 24, 2020* [Press briefing]. Retrieved from https://mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKnonkJE02bw/content/id/4513474
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2021a, February 11). *Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, February 11, 2021* [Press briefing]. Retrieved from https://mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKnonkJE02bw/content/id/4570209/
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2021b, February 26). *Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, February 26, 2021* [Press briefing]. Retrieved from https://mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKnonkJE02bw/content/id/4601052
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2021c, October 22). *О ситуации с героизацией нацизма, распространении неонацизма и других видов практики, которые способствуют эскалации современных форм расизма, расовой дискриминации, ксенофобии и связанной с ними нетерпимости* [*On the situation with the glorification of Nazism, the spread of neo-Nazism and other practices that contribute to the escalation of modern forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance*]. Retrieved from https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/humanitarian_cooperation/1784271/#19
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2021d, March 18). *Violations of the Rights of Russian Citizens and Compatriots Abroad* [Report]. Retrieved from https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/humanitarian_cooperation/1417810/?lang=en#7

Sputnik Latvia articles

- Sputnik Latvia. (2019a, November 21). *Борьба с инакомыслием в извращенной форме: посольство РФ о запрете телеканалов в Латвии* [Fighting dissent in a perverted form: Russian embassy on banning TV channels in Latvia]. Sputnik. <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20191121/Borba-s-inakomysliem-v-izvraschennoy-forme-posolstvo-RF-o-zaprete-telekanalov-v-Latvii-12793368.html> (accessed March 22, 2022).
- Sputnik Latvia. (2019b, November 1). *Захарова осудила глумление над памятью советских воинов в Риге* [Zakharova condemned mockery of memory of Soviet soldiers in Riga]. Sputnik. <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20191101/Zakharova-osudila-glumlennie-nad-pamyatyu-sovetskikh-voinov-v-Rige-12697432.html> (accessed March 22, 2022).
- Sputnik Latvia. (2019c, November 21). *МИД РФ: в Латвии сложилась критическая ситуация для русскоязычных* [Russian Foreign Ministry: Latvia faces critical situation for Russian speakers]. Sputnik. <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20191121/MID-RF-v-Latvii-slozhilas-kriticheskaya-situatsiya-dlya-russkoyazychnykh-12795483.html> (accessed March 22, 2022).
- Sputnik Latvia. (2019d, October 3). *“Неприкрытая дискриминация”. Захарова разгромила реформу образования в Латвии* [“Undisguised discrimination”: Zakharova defeated the education reform in Latvia]

- <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20191003/Neprikrytaya-diskriminatsiya-Zakharova-razgromila-reformu-obrazovaniya-v-Latvii-12549244.html> (accessed March 22, 2022).
- Sputnik Latvia. (2020a, February 13). *Политик о ТВ-поправках Левитса: еще бы посадили рядом языкового инспектора* [*Politician about Levits' TV amendments: they should have put a language inspector next to him*]. Sputnik. <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20200213/Politik-TV-popravki-Levits-esche-by-posadili-divan-yazykovogo-inspektora-13212912.html> (accessed March 22, 2022)
- Sputnik Latvia. (2020b April 29). *Захарова: Латвия зашла слишком далеко в грязной антироссийской возне* [*Zakharova: Latvia has gone too far in its dirty anti-Russian fuss*]. Sputnik. <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20200429/Latvia-zashla-slishkom-daleko-gryaznoy-antirossiyskoy-vozne-predupredila-Zakharova-13644695.html> (accessed March 22, 2022).
- Sputnik Latvia. (2020c, July 2). *Симоньян о запрете RT в Латвии: Sputnik блокировка не мешает* [*Simonyan on RT ban in Latvia: Blocking does not interfere with Sputnik*]. Sputnik. <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20200702/Simonyan-o-zaprete-RT-v-Latvii-Sputnik-blokirovka-ne-meshaet-13988773.html> (accessed March 22, 2022).
- Sputnik Latvia. (2020d, July 3). *Митрофанов: возня властей Латвии вокруг RT выглядит жалкой* [*Mitrofanov: the fuss of the Latvian authorities around RT looks pathetic*]. Sputnik. <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20200703/Mitrofanov-voznya-vlastey-Latvii-vokrug-RT-vyglyadit-zhalkoy-13994029.html> (accessed March 22, 2022).
- Sputnik Latvia. (2020e, July 23). *Панкратов: идея “советской оккупации” находит в Латвии отклик в недалеких умах* [*Pankratov: the idea of “Soviet occupation” resonates in Latvia’s narrow-minded minds*]. Sputnik. <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20200723/Pankratov-ideya-sovetskoj-okkupatsii-nakhodit-v-Latvii-otklik-v-nedalekikh-umakh-14089907.html> (accessed March 22, 2022).
- Sputnik Latvia. (2020f, December 4). *“Не позорьтесь!” Киселев призвал Латвию прекратить преследование собственных граждан* [*“Do not disgrace yourself!” Kiselev urged Latvia to stop the persecution of its own citizens*]. Sputnik. <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20201204/Ne-pozortse-Kiselev-prizval-Latviyu-prekratit-presledovanie-sobstvennykh-grazhdan-14796293.html> (accessed March 22, 2022).
- Sputnik Latvia. (2020g, December 4). *Насилие стало нормой? Союз журналистов России отреагировал на задержания в Латвии* [*Has violence become the norm? The Union of Journalists of Russia reacted to the detentions in Latvia*]. Sputnik. <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20201204/Nasilie-stalo-normoy-Soyuz-zhurnalistov-Russia-otreagiroval-zaderzhaniya-Latvia-14796522.html> (accessed March 22, 2022).
- Sputnik Latvia. (2020h, December 16). *“Упорно молчат”. Москва возмущена тем, как ЕС покрывает Латвию* [*“Stubbornly Silent”: Moscow Outraged by EU Covering Up for Latvia*]. Sputnik. <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20201216/molchat-uporno-molchat-moscow-vozmuschena-eu-pokryvaet-latvia-14864165.html> (accessed March 22, 2022).
- Sputnik Latvia. (2020i, July 9). *МИД РФ: Латвия все хуже скрывает свою одержимость русофобией* [*Russian Foreign Ministry: Latvia is increasingly hiding its obsession with Russophobia*]. Sputnik. <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20200709/mid-russia-latvia-vse-khuzhe-skryvaet-svoyu-oderzhimost-rusofobiy-14024015.html> (accessed March 22, 2022).

- Sputnik Latvia. (2020j, February 12). *Этого никто не видит? МИД РФ уличил власти Латвии в прямой агрессии к русскоязычным СМИ* [Doesn't anyone see this? The Russian Foreign Ministry has accused Latvian authorities of direct aggression towards Russian-language media]. Sputnik. <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20200212/etogo-nikto-ne-vidit-mid-russia-ulichil-latvia-priamoy-agressii-russkoyazychnym-smi-13210899.html> (accessed March 22, 2022).
- Sputnik Latvia. (2020k, December 10). *Перестаньте врать! Захарова осадила главу МИД Латвии после слов о журналистах* [Stop Lying! Zakharova Slams Latvian Foreign Minister After Words About Journalists]. Sputnik. <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20201210/perestante-vrat-zakharova-osadila-glavu-mid-latvia-delo-zhurnalistov-14828933.html> (accessed March 22, 2022).
- Sputnik Latvia. (2020l, September 23). *Провокационная затея: МИД РФ осудил запрет георгиевской ленточки в Латвии* [Provocative idea: Russian Foreign Ministry condemns ban of St. George ribbon in Latvia]. Sputnik. <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20200923/Provokatsionnaya-zateya-MID-RF-osudil-zapret-georgievskoy-lentochki-v-Latvii-14407518.html> (accessed March 22, 2022).
- Sputnik Latvia. (2020m, July 23). *МИД РФ раскритиковал “оккупационную доктрину” вхождения стран Балтии в СССР* [The Russian Foreign Ministry criticizes “occupation doctrine” of the Baltic states joining USSR]. Sputnik. <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20200723/MID-RF-raskritikoval-okkupatsionnuyu-doktrinu-vkhozhdeniya-stran-Baltii-v-SSSR--14088142.html> (accessed March 22, 2022).
- Sputnik Latvia. (2020n, August 20). *МИД РФ призвал власти Латвии отказаться от исторических обид* [Russian Foreign Ministry Calls on Latvian Authorities to Give Up Historical Grievances]. Sputnik. <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20200820/mid-russia-prizval-vlasti-latvia-otkazatsya-istoricheskikh-obid-14237897.html>
- Sputnik Latvia. (2021a, February 26). *Посольство России про вандализм в Екабпилсе: неонацистский реваншизм* [The Embassy of Russia about the vandalism in Jekabpils: neo-Nazi revanchism]. Sputnik. <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20210225/Posolstvo-Rossii-pro-vandalizm-v-Ekabpils-neo-natsistskiy-revanshizm-15232008.html> (accessed March 22, 2022).

Appendices

Appendix I: Interview guide focus groups

1. INTRODUCTION	18:00
Self-presentation by the researcher and the moderator of the focus groups, introduction to study objectives and explanation of the interview process.	
Participants' self-introduction	
2. MEDIA USE	18:15
Do you use media? What media do you use?	
Do you follow news media? What news media? In what language?	
How do you decide what media to use?	
What is important to you when you choose news sources?	
3. COLLECTIVE NARRATIVES	18:30
Do you see news stories about Latvia in the media?	
What news stories about Latvia do you usually see?	
Do you see news stories about Russian speakers in the media?	
What news stories about Russian speakers in the media do you usually see?	
4. NARRATIVE RECEPTION	18:45
I have three news stories I would like you to discuss. Let's start with the first news story (education) Have you seen this news story before? If yes, where? /Are you familiar with this news story? What do you think of this news story?/What are your first impressions? What do you like about this news story?/What do you dislike about this news story? Is this a news story you discuss with family and friends?	

<p>Let's continue with the second news story (media)</p> <p>Have you seen this news story before? If yes, where? /Are you familiar with this news story?</p> <p>What do you think of this news story?/What are your first impressions?</p> <p>What do you like about this news story?/What do you dislike about this news story?</p> <p>Is this a news story you discuss with family and friends?</p>	
<p>Now let's discuss the third news story (history)</p> <p>Have you seen this news story before? If yes, where? /Are you familiar with this news story?</p> <p>What do you think of this news story?/What are your first impressions?</p> <p>What do you like about this news story?/What do you dislike about this news story?</p> <p>Is this a news story you discuss with family and friends?</p>	
5. COLLECTIVE NARRATIVES	19:30
<p>Now that we have talked about Latvia in different media, what do you think of Latvia?</p>	
<p>How do you experience being Russian speakers in Latvia?</p>	
6. CONCLUSION	19:45
<p>Reflections, comments and concluding remarks by the participants. Acknowledgements for participation and distribution of gift cards.</p>	

Appendix II: Interview guide follow-up interviews

Individual narratives (stories about themselves, Latvian, Russian and other factors)

- Could you tell me a little about yourself?
- Could you describe how you would identify yourself?
- What words or labels would you use to describe yourself?
- Are there parts of your identity that you feel are determined by other people or by society? If so, what?
- Could you describe how you experience being a Russian speaker in Latvia?

Media use (as a context for narrative reception)

- How does your media use look a typical day?
- Could you describe what media you used yesterday?
- Could you give examples of how you access news?
- Has your media use been affected by current events? If yes, in what ways?

Strategic narratives (in-depth interpretation and importance)

Explain that I would like to discuss the three themes from the focus groups again

- Could you tell me about your experience of Latvia's ban on Russian media? (What is your relationship to this topic?) How would you explain/What do you think is the problem? What do you think caused the problem? What do you think is the solution to this problem? If you were asked to tell a story about this event, what story would you tell?
- Could you tell me about your experience of the transition from Russian to Latvian in schools? (What is your relationship to this topic?) What do you think is the problem? What do you think caused the problem? What do you think is the solution to this problem? If you were asked to tell a story about this event, what story would you tell?
- Could you tell me about your experience of Latvia's ban of the St George ribbon? (What is your relationship to this topic?) What do you think is the problem? What do you think caused the problem? What do you think is the solution to this problem? If you were asked to tell a story about this event, what story would you tell?
- These three topics are common themes from Russian media. Could you tell me if there are other stories or themes that you see about

Russia? Which stories are important to you? Which stories are less important to you?

Conclusion

Is there anything you would like to share or that you find relevant that I have not asked you about?

Appendix III: Discussion material focus groups

1. “Undisguised discrimination” Zakharova crushed the education reform in Latvia

The official representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, named at least three international conventions that Latvia violates by forcibly transferring all education in the country into the Latvian language.

Latvia’s plans to de-Russify the entire education system are clearly discriminatory, Moscow calls on the international community to assess this unacceptable situation, the spokeswoman for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Maria Zakharova said at a briefing.

“The plans agreed within the ruling coalition of Latvia to de-Russify the entire education system, including preschool institutions, are of serious concern. It is obvious that this initiative is of a pronounced discriminatory nature and its ultimate goal is the forcible assimilation of the Russian-speaking population”, Zakharova stressed.

As the representative of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted, the destructive line of the Latvian authorities ignores the opinion of a significant part of Latvian society, since the decision was made without extensive discussion and notwithstanding mass protests. By transferring education into Latvian, Latvia violates international legal obligations to ensure the linguistic rights of national minorities within the framework of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination of 1965, the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education of 1960, the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, as well as a number of other fundamental treaty-legal instruments to which the Republic of Latvia is a signatory.

“It is especially worrying that the exclusion of the native language from preschool education can have a very unfavourable effect on the education of Russian-speaking children and would obviously have a negative psychological impact”, Zakharova said. According to the diplomat, Moscow expects from relevant international structures a principled assessment of the unacceptable situation in Latvia with the violation of the rights of national minorities in the language sphere.

Despite the fact that about 40 per cent of the inhabitants of Latvia speak Russian, the only state language in the republic is Latvian. In March last year, the Latvian parliament adopted amendments to the Law on Education and the Law on General Education, providing for a gradual transition to teaching in the state language at the secondary school stage in schools of national minorities from the 2019/2020 academic year. Full transfer to study in Latvian will end on 1 September 2021.

In April 2019, the Constitutional Court of Latvia declared legal the liquidation of the bilingual system of public secondary education. The Court ruled that

the school reform amendments were in line with the norms of the Constitution and other laws of Latvia regarding public schools. Private schools will be dealt with in a separate case.

The Cabinet of Ministers of Latvia has fixed the rules from 1 September of this year to use Latvian as the main language of games for children from the age of five in all preschool institutions in Latvia.

2. The fight against dissent in a perverted form: the Russian Embassy on the ban on TV channels in Latvia

In Latvia, the concept of “freedom of speech” is interpreted in a peculiar way, they do not hesitate to use strict censorship in the fight against objectionable media, the Russian Embassy in Riga said.

The decision to ban the rebroadcasting of nine Russian channels in Latvia was called by the Russian embassy in Riga another manifestation of “freedom of speech” in Latvian.

The National Council for Electronic Media (NEPLP) has decided to stop the broadcasting of nine channels in Latvia, which are part of the largest private media holding in the Russian Federation, the National Media Group. As a reason, NEPLP called upon the fact that sanctions were imposed against the beneficiary of the media group Yury Kovalchuk in the EU. Under the restriction were TV channels: “Time: far and near”, “Bober”, “House of Cinema”, “House of Cinema Premium”, “Music of the First”, “Oh!”, “Let’s go”, “Telecafe” and “Petersburg-Fifth channel”.

“In the uncompromising fight against dissent, which is becoming more and more perverted, the Latvian authorities do not hesitate to use strict censorship, blocking objectionable media under far-fetched pretexts. Unfortunately, such blatant disrespect for the principles of democracy is already becoming the norm here”, the diplomatic mission said in a statement on Facebook.

Earlier, their concern over the decision of the Latvian authorities was expressed in the Russian Permanent Mission to the OSCE. “We are concerned about the decision of the Latvian National Electronic Media Council to suspend the broadcasting of nine Russian TV channels in the country. We call on @OSCE_RFoM (account of the OSCE Special Representative on Freedom of the Media Harlem Desir - ed.) to respond to another gross violation of the principle of freedom of speech and the press by Latvia”, the message of the Russian Mission to the OSCE says on Twitter.

In turn, Timur Shafir, vice-president of the Russian Union of Journalists, member of the executive committee of the International Federation of Journalists, said that the decision of NEPLP can only be regarded as pressure on the media, no matter what sanction claims the Latvian supervisory authorities cover.

“Such a policy of ‘running ahead of the locomotive’ of the European Union has long been present in the authorities and supervisory bodies of the Baltic countries. For a long time, we have been witnessing a large number of

definitely repressive actions that they are taking against Russian media and journalists”, Shafir stated.

According to him, this action actually falls under the category of pressure on the media, opposition to the work of the media, and in fact shows a persistent desire to limit not only the work of the Russian media, but also the ability of their own population to receive alternative information about events in the Baltic states, in Russia and in the world as a whole.

3. Provocative idea: the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the ban of the St George ribbon in Latvia

Moscow condemns the adoption in Latvia of a law banning the use of the St George ribbon at public events. This is a provocation that insults the memory of the liberators of Europe from fascism, said the spokeswoman for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Maria Zakharova.

The Parliament of Latvia in the first reading approved amendments to the legislation providing for a ban on the use of the St George ribbon during public events – both entertaining and festive, as well as at meetings, processions and pickets. The amendments were developed by deputies of the National Alliance.

The Russian side strongly condemns another attempt to revise history and actually contest the results of World War II, which are not subject to revision, said the spokeswoman for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Maria Zakharova, commenting on the bill.

“In essence, this is a provocative undertaking directed against those Latvians who fought shoulder to shoulder with representatives of other nations for the liberation of Europe and Latvia from Nazi enslavement”, the Russian diplomat said.

“With their legislative initiative to ban the symbol of Victory – the St George ribbon – Latvian parliamentarians insult the memory of these people instead of bowing low to them for a chance to live in peace”, Zakharova stressed.

As Sputnik Latvia already has reported, the proposal to ban the St George ribbon provoked strong condemnation both among Russian Latvians and in Russia.

The Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation plans to appeal to the European Parliament and the OSCE about the initiative of the Latvian nationalists, so that European organisations clearly condemn such an initiative, which can lead to the strengthening of nationalist forces and provoke conflicts and clashes.

Appendix IV: Advertisement



UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET

Participants needed for focus groups

Do you speak Russian? Are you 18-30 years old? Do you live in Riga, Daugavpils or Liepaja? If you answered yes to all three questions, this research project may be of interest to you!

About the project

My name is Emma Rönngren, I am a doctoral student at Uppsala University. I am looking for participants for my research on how Russian speaking youth perceive Russian media broadcast abroad and controlled by the Russian Federation. The purpose of this project is to study how Russian speaking youth in Latvia use media and perceive attempts of information influence by the Russian Federation. I am especially interested in the experience of young Russian speakers aged 18-30 living in one of the three largest Latvian cities.

About the focus groups

Participation in the project is a great opportunity to meet others and learn more about yourself. Focus groups will be held in Riga, Daugavpils and Liepaja and will last from 90 to 120 minutes. Participants will receive a €10 voucher as a thank you for participating. Those who wish will be invited to an additional individual interview. Focus groups and interviews will be recorded and transcribed.

About participation

Your participation is very important for this project. All information received will be used with discretion. The analyzed data will be presented in a doctoral dissertation. You may withdraw your participation at any time without giving any reason.

Does it sound interesting? To register, please fill out this short form. I will contact you as soon as possible and provide more information about the study.

doi.medfarm.uu.se/bin/kurt3/kurt/27862

Sincerely,
Emma Rönngren

Emma Rönngren, PhD candidate
Institute for Russia and Eurasia Studies / Department of Informatics and Media
Uppsala University
Box 514, SE-751 20 Uppsala, Sweden
emma.ronngren@ires.uu.se / emma.ronngren@im.uu.se
www.ires.uu.se / www.im.uu.se



Appendix V: Survey questions for recruitment

1. Name (short text)
2. Year of birth (dropdown menu)
3. City (single choice – Riga, Daugavpils, Liepāja, Other)
4. Language of everyday communication (multiple choice – Russian, Latvian, Other)
5. Education (multiple choice – no formal education, high school, bachelor's, master's, doctorate/PhD, Other)
6. Occupation (short text)
7. Email (short text)
8. Phone (short text and optional)
9. Other comments (short text and optional)
10. Check the box to consent to the processing and use of information from this questionnaire by Uppsala University. This data will be stored in the EU/EEA and will be deleted after the dissertation is published. Uppsala University is responsible for the processing of your personal data in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). (single choice)

Uppsala Studies in Media and Communication

- 2002:1 Olsson, Tobias. *Mycket väsen om ingenting. Hur datorn och Internet undgår att formas till medborgarnas tekniker*. 311 pages.
ISSN 0585-5551, ISBN 91-554-5429-1.
- 2003:2 Johansson, Catrin. *Visioner och verkligheter. Kommunikationen om företagets strategi*. 373 pages.
ISSN 1651-4777, ISBN 91-554-5564-6.
- 2004:3 Severson, Pernilla. *En gökunge i public service-boet? Publikens roll i digitaliseringen av marksänd television*. 224 pages,
ISSN 0585-5551, ISBN 91-554-5978-1.
- 2005:4 Jimes, Cynthia. *Communication as Structuration. Viewing learning through the lens of communication*. 163 pages.
ISSN 1651-4777, ISBN 91-554-6121-2.
- 2010:5 Ekström, Ylva. *We are like Chameleons! Changing mediascapes, cultural identities and city sisters in Dar es Salaam*. 301 pages.
ISSN 1651-4777, ISBN 978-91-554-7770-7.
- 2011:6 Strand, Cecilia. *Perilous silences and counterproductive narratives pertaining to HIV/AIDS in the Ugandan. Lesotho and Namibian Press*. 186 pages.
ISSN 1652-9030 0346-5462, ISBN 978-91-554-8134-6.
- 2014:7 Grundberg, Iréne. *TV-produktion i Sverige. En studie av TV-producenter inom drama och samhällsprogram*. 784 pages.
ISSN 1651-4777, ISBN 978-91-554-8849-9.
- 2015:8 Svensson, Göran. *Att förstå mediekritik. Begreppsliga, empiriska och teoretiska studier av svensk mediekritik 1998-2013*. 327 pages.
ISSN 1651-4777, ISBN 978-91-554-9127-7.
- 2015:9 Monstad, Therese. *Attempts to Bridge the Gaps. Opportunities and Challenges in the Communicative Constitution of Organizations*. 251 pages.
ISSN 1651-4777, ISBN 978-91-554-9167-3.
- 2016:10 Svensson, Emma. *Mind the Mind. Strategic Communication in the Swedish Green Party*. 240 pages.
ISSN 1651-4777, ISBN 978-91-554-9490-2

- 2016:11 Prax, Patrick. *Co-creative Game Design as Participatory Alternative Media*. 95 pages.
ISSN 1651-4777, ISBN 978-91-554-9599-2
- 2016:12 Firer-Blaess, Sylvain. *The Collective Identity of Anonymity: Web of Meanings in a Digitally Enabled Movement*. 220 pages.
ISSN 1651-4777, ISBN 978-91-554-9602-9
- 2017:13 Lövgren, Daniel. *Dancing Together Alone. Inconsistencies and Contradictions of Strategic Communication in Swedish Universities*. 221 pp.
ISSN 1651-4777, ISBN 978-91-513-0148-8.
- 2020:14 Chen, Yiming. *The Construction of the Professional Identity of the TV News Presenter in Two Chinese News Programmes: A Discourse-Theoretical Analysis*. 325 pages.
ISSN 1651-4777, ISBN 978-91-513-0951-4.
- 2021:15 Filimonov, Kirill. *The Performance of Participation in Russian Alternative Media: Discourse, Materiality and Affect in Grassroots Media Production in Contemporary Russia*. 200 pages.
ISSN 1651-4777, ISBN 978-91-513-1091-6.
- 2021:16 Chadha, Siddharth. *Curating Precarity: Swedish Queer Film Festivals as Micro-Activism*. 189 pages.
ISSN 1651-4777, ISBN 978-91-513-1145-6.
- 2021:17 Linden, Katerina. *Death Online in Contemporary Russia: Memory, Forgetting and the Connective Presence of Mourning on the Internet*. 153 pages.
ISSN 1651-4777, ISBN 978-91-513-1151-7.
- 2025:18 Rönngren, Emma. *Making Sense of Russian Strategic Narratives: Affect and Reception Among Young Russian Speakers in Latvia*. 221 pages.
ISSN 1651-4777, ISBN 978-91-513-2372-5.

