

NATO Coverage in The Baltic States: Who's Dominating the English Language Space?

The Russian annexation of Crimea and invasion into Eastern Ukraine in 2014 served as a wake-up call for NATO countries. Not only had it helped to understand the threats of hybrid warfare, but also to rally public support for increase in NATO defense measures. One of the most successfully implemented measures were the Enhanced Forward Presence Battalions on the Eastern NATO flank. The Baltic states and Poland each received a multinational battalion of NATO troops making the vulnerable Eastern flank a hard nut to crack for the Kremlin. As a result, Kremlin again turned to information warfare methods to counter these measures by trying to turn local populations against the troops and donor countries to lose faith in the idea. Using a social media listening tool Buzzsumo we were able to investigate which articles and posts regarding NATO in the Baltic countries were the most engaged with. But what is more, we were able to see which domains and platforms dominated the public space. In our latest research, we investigate the different the most engaged with media content from past two years, to see who dominated the public space in the English language regarding the NATO in the Baltic States.

Social Listening Tool and Methodology

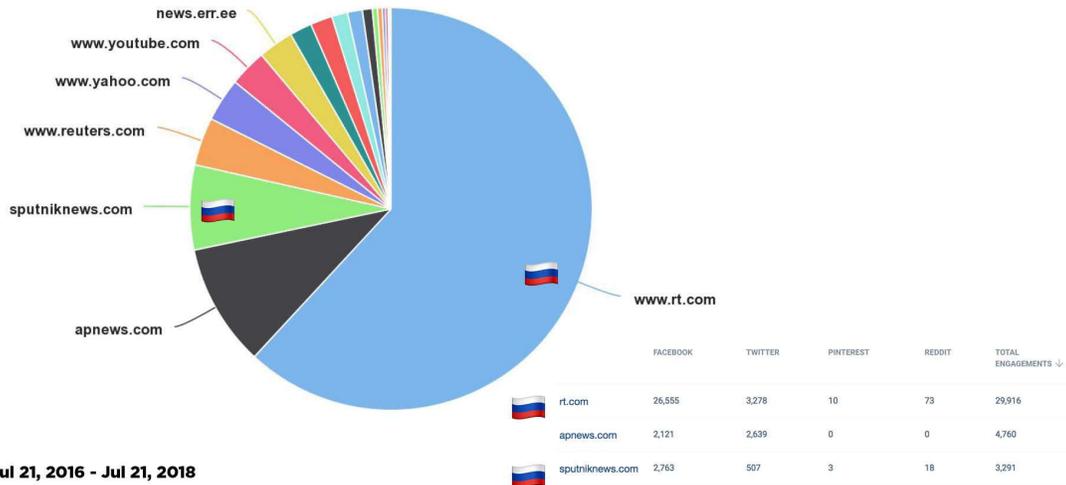
BuzzSumo is one of the top social media analytics tools. It comes with a powerful social media search engine that helps to find and analyze the best performing content related to a specific niche. Originally used in marketing for doing content and competitive research, this tool is also very useful in analyzing information warfare trends. In this case, we were interested to see the most engaged with media content in regards to NATO in the three Baltic states. We used the keywords 'NATO Lithuania', 'NATO Latvia', 'NATO Estonia' and 'NATO Baltic States'. We were able to check two years worth of data from July 21, 2016 to July 21, 2018, also taking a deeper look at February 2017, when the first Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) troops entered the Baltic States. Sorting the media content by the most engaged with criteria, we were able to see which media outlets were the most influential in the English language digital space.

Estonia

In the case of keywords 'NATO Estonia', Russian state funded media outlet RT dominated the engagement stats, with almost thirty thousand engagements. The second most popular outlet was US based Associated Press with almost four thousand engagements and the third was Russian state funded media outlet Sputnik News, with slightly over three thousand engagements. As we can see from the graph, Russian state funded media outlets garnered over two-thirds of the total engagements in the past two years.

Most Engaged With Media Content: 'NATO Estonia'

Top Domains on All Networks



Jul 21, 2016 - Jul 21, 2018

Image Source – Buzzsumo

Buzzsumo analysis also provides a time graph, which demonstrates the most active months of engagement. In this case, the bars peaked at the period from February 2017 to April 2017.

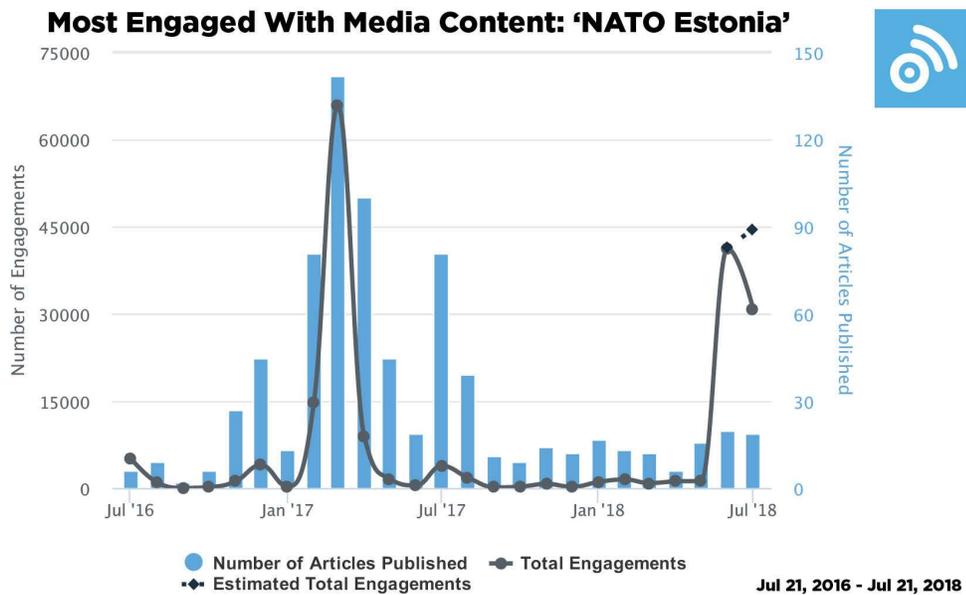


Image Source – Buzzsumo

We also took a closer look into the most engaged with articles in the periods of February 2017 and March 2017, right after the first EFP soldiers reached the Baltics. Buzzsumo suggested that amongst the three most popular articles in both months, two were from Russian state funded media outlets.

Most Engaged With Media Content: 'NATO Estonia'

Most Engaged Articles for NATO Estonia (February 1st, 2017 - February 28th, 2017) [Export](#)

	Facebook Engagements	Twitter Shares	Pinterest Shares	Reddit Engagements	Number of Links	Evergreen Score	Total Engagements
 US tanks, infantry fighting vehicles arrive in Estonia amid NATO buildup on Russian borders <small>By RT - Feb 6, 2017 rt.com</small>	6.4K	510	5	11	80	5	7K
 Estonia Worried Sexy Russian Agents Could Provoke Bar Fights With NATO Troops <small>By Sputnik - Feb 21, 2017 sputniknews.com</small>	2K	79	2	2	13	2	2.1K
 Estonia 'not afraid' to be on Nato frontline, president says <small>By Richard Milne - Feb 9, 2017 ft.com</small>	1K	9	0	0	15	0	1K

Most Engaged Articles for NATO Estonia (March 1st, 2017 - March 31st, 2017) [Export](#)

	Facebook Engagements	Twitter Shares	Pinterest Shares	Reddit Engagements	Number of Links	Evergreen Score	Total Engagements
 UK troops in Estonia to deter 'Russian aggression' <small>By bbc News - Mar 18, 2017 bbc.co.uk</small>	24.4K	1.2K	1	89	7	5	25.7K
 UK troops deployed in Estonia to 'defend NATO' from Russia (VIDEO) <small>By RT - Mar 18, 2017 rt.com</small> Video	8.3K	795	1	5	23	3	9.1K
 Over 100 NATO military vehicles arrive in Estonia as part of 'biggest deployment since Cold War' <small>By RT - Mar 23, 2017 rt.com</small>	4.9K	597	2	0	18	4	5.5K

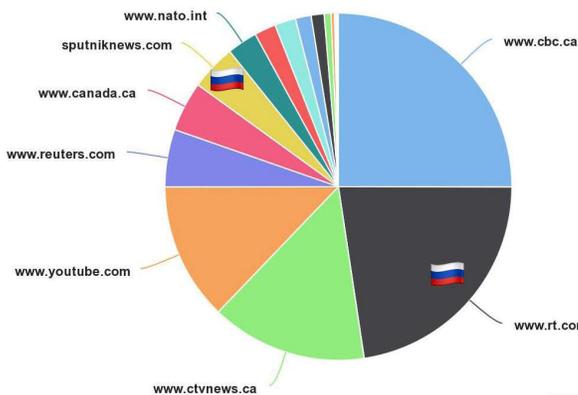
Image Source – Buzzsumo

Latvia

Meanwhile, with the keywords 'NATO Latvia', the engagement stats were less dominated by Russian state funded media. The most popular and the third most popular outlets were Canadian Broadcasting Corporation with six and a half thousand engagements and CTV News outlet with three and a half thousand engagements. Russian state funded outlet RT came in second place with almost six thousand engagements.

Most Engaged With Media Content: 'NATO Latvia'

Top Domains on All Networks



	FACEBOOK	TWITTER	PINTEREST	REDDIT	TOTAL ENGAGEMENTS
 cbc.ca	5,207	489	0	850	6,546
 rt.com	4,951	931	3	26	5,911
 ctvnews.ca	3,417	327	0	56	3,800

Jul 21, 2016 - Jul 21, 2018

Image Source – Buzzsumo

The time graph also did not show any particularly high engagement during the first months of EFP deployment. Overall number of published articles over the two year span also seemed to be less than in the case of Estonia or Lithuania.

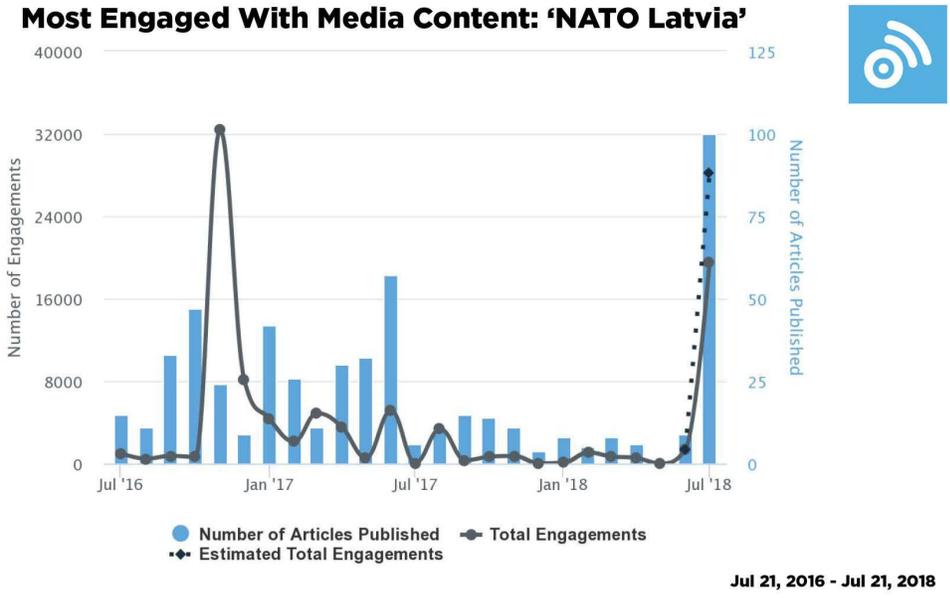


Image Source – Buzzsumo

Looking at the most engaged with articles from February 2017 and March 2017, similar patterns appeared. Russian state funded media had a highly engaged with article in both February and March.

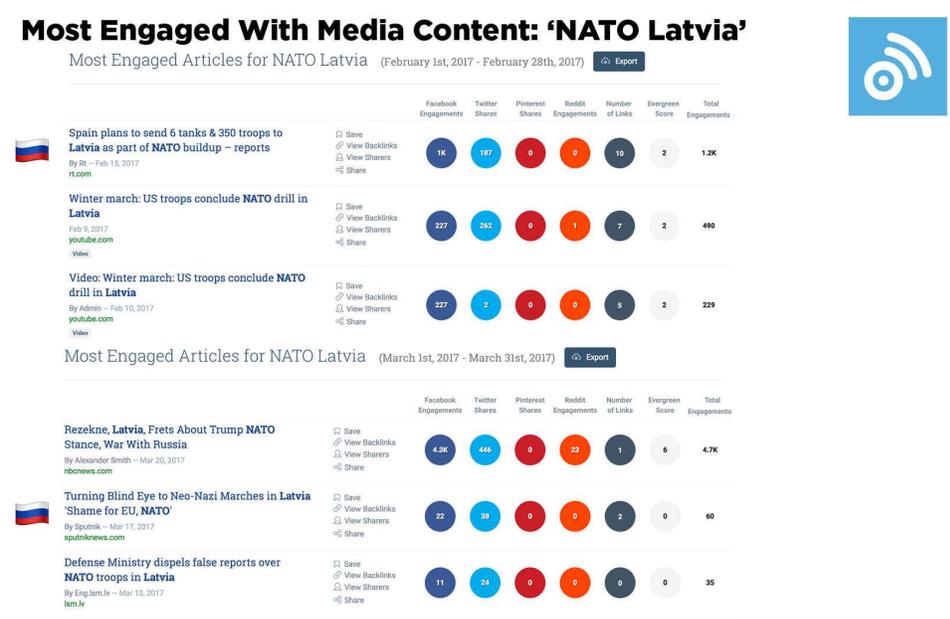


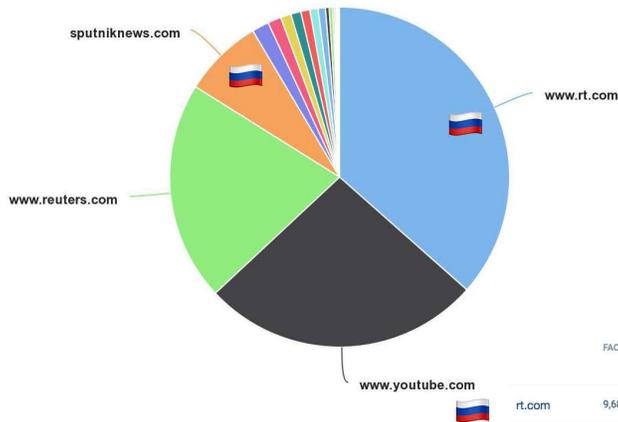
Image Source – Buzzsumo

Lithuania

As of Lithuania, RT took a leading position with approximately one-third of all the engagements. The second most engaged platform was YouTube, but to understand what kind of content was posted on this platform, it requires a more thorough investigation. Sputnik News appeared as the fourth most engaged with platform.

Most Engaged With Media Content: 'NATO Lithuania'

Top Domains on All Networks



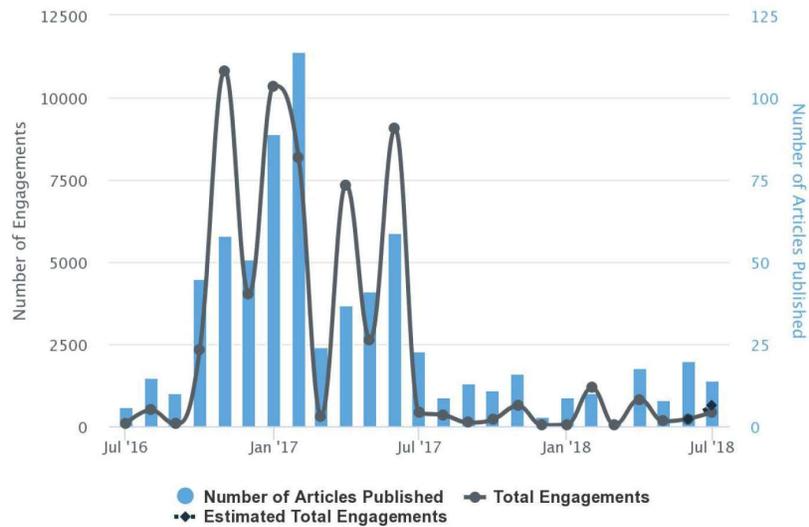
	FACEBOOK	TWITTER	PINTEREST	REDDIT	TOTAL ENGAGEMENTS
rt.com	9,686	1,645	11	31	11,373
youtube.com	7,839	304	0	110	8,253
reuters.com	4,251	1,861	0	386	6,498

Jul 21, 2016 - Jul 21, 2018

Image Source – Buzzsumo

In regards to the timeline, 'NATO Lithuania' keywords had most articles published on February 2017. Large spikes of engagement stats were also visible around the same period of time.

Most Engaged With Media Content: 'NATO Lithuania'



Jul 21, 2016 - Jul 21, 2018

Image Source – Buzzsumo

On February 2017, the two most engaged with articles were written by RT and Sputink news. Only the third most popular was provided by Bloomberg, and garnered roughly half of the engagements of the RT article. On March, the most popular article only had 64 engagements, compared to one and a half thousand on February. None of the most popular articles on March were of Russian origin.

Most Engaged With Media Content: 'NATO Lithuania'



Image Source – Buzzsumo

Baltic States

Finally, we have analyzed media content in regards to the Baltic States as a whole, using the keywords 'Baltic States'. The situation was mostly similar to Estonia, where one outlet dominated over two-thirds of all the engagements. In this case, the dominant outlet was the Russian state funded media outlet Sputnik News. It had five times more engagements than the runner-up Baltics.livuamap.com.

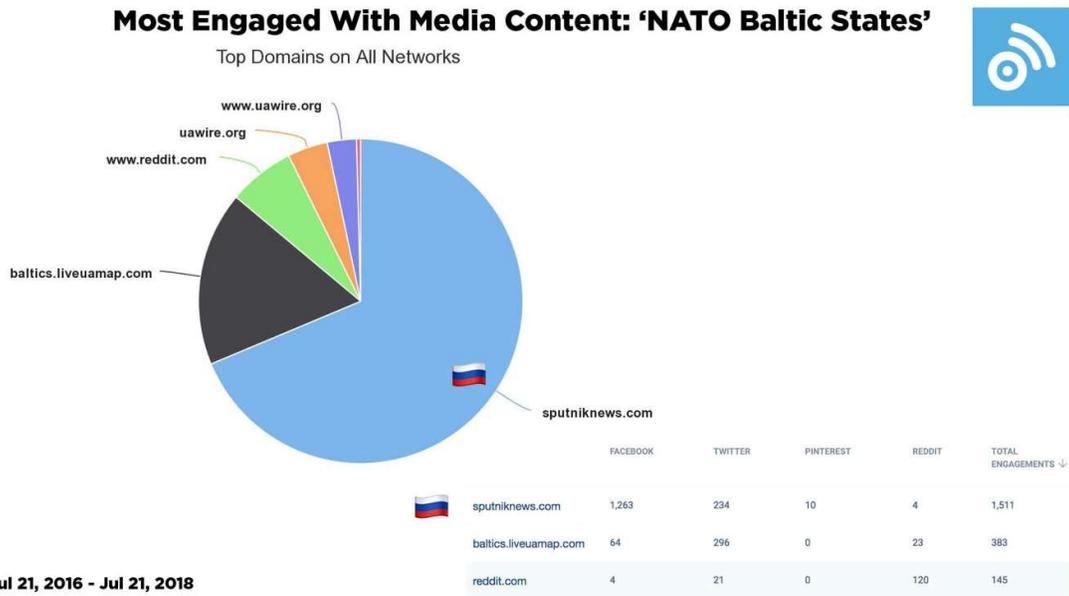
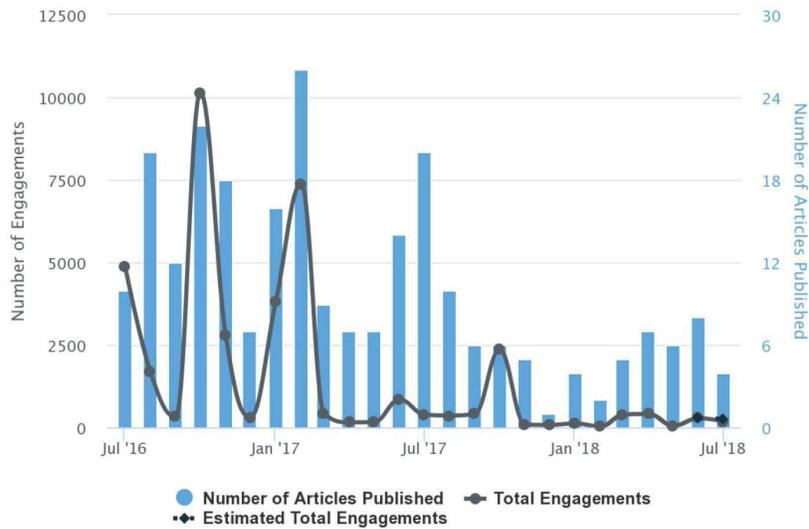


Image Source – Buzzsumo

The analysis of the timeline revealed a similar patterns to Lithuania's and Estonia's cases. A gradual build-up to February 2017 and a slow decline with occasional peaks. February 2017, again had the most articles published and one of the highest number of engagements.

Most Engaged With Media Content: 'NATO Baltic States'



Jul 21, 2016 - Jul 21, 2018

Image Source – Buzzsumo

As of most engaged with media content, February 2017 had the most popular Russian media article, written by RT. This article was more than five times more popular than the CBS News runner-up. As in Lithuania’s case, March had no highly engaged with articles and none of them were of Russian origin.

Most Engaged With Media Content: 'NATO Baltic States'

Most Engaged Articles for NATO Baltic States (February 1st, 2017 - February 28th, 2017) [Export](#)

Article Title	Facebook Engagements	Twitter Shares	Pinterest Shares	Reddit Engagements	Number of Links	Evergreen Score	Total Engagements
It's NATO - not Russia - that has deployed tanks to Poland & Baltic States – George Galloway By RT – Feb 4, 2017 rt.com	4.7K	962	2	0	10	4	5.7K
Baltic states, ex-NATO commander Breedlove worry Putin may send 100k Russian troops to Belarus for Zapad drill By Tucker Reals – Feb 10, 2017 cbsnews.com	940	169	7	10	43	6	1.1K
Baltic states seek more NATO help ahead of Russian exercise By Andrius Sytas – Feb 9, 2017 reuters.com	166	144	0	10	95	4	320

Most Engaged Articles for NATO Baltic States (March 1st, 2017 - March 31st, 2017) [Export](#)

Article Title	Facebook Engagements	Twitter Shares	Pinterest Shares	Reddit Engagements	Number of Links	Evergreen Score	Total Engagements
Rising Tensions Between Russia and NATO in the Baltic States The Complete Series Mar 4, 2017 youtube.com	221	4	0	0	0	1	232
Deterring Russian Aggression in the Baltic States: What it Takes to Win By David A. – Mar 1, 2017 rand.org	14	97	0	1	5	0	112
U.S.: Secretary Of State To Discuss Strengthening NATO In Baltic Meeting Mar 21, 2017 stratfor.com	2	25	0	0	0	0	27



Image Source – Buzzsumo

Findings

As we can see from the analysis, all of the keywords concerning NATO in the Baltic countries had exceptionally high Russian media influence. Not only was the

engagement unnaturally high, but also the content was critical of NATO. We can also observe a gradual build-up, reaching a peak in February of 2017, when the first EFP soldiers were deployed in the Baltics, followed by a slow decline in the reporting and engagement. This pattern also suggests of a possible well thought-through informational operation with clear preparation and systematic execution.

Out of the four different keyword searches, Latvia stood out as the least dominated by the Russian media articles. Various reasons could have caused this effect, varying from possible higher efforts to work in Russian language to influence the local Russian speaking community, or even the efforts of communication of the hosted EFP troops. As we can see, a number of most engaged with articles in Latvia were of Canadian media outlets. We didn't see the same effect in other keyword searches that we used.

Another important observation worth mentioning is that none of the most engaged with outlets were of local Baltic countries origin. This shows that the countries hosting the EFP troops are not involved in forming the public opinions in the most used NATO language. Even more analysis could be done focusing on the Russian language or the local Baltic States languages. What is more, it would be interesting to see the patterns in the languages of the hosted EFP troops, as RT and Sputnik News have popular media outlets in French and especially in German language.

To have a better understanding of what were the narratives before and after EFP troops were deployed it would require for a more thorough investigation. Knowing the nature of information that Russian state funded media, such as RT and Sputnik News are providing, these findings raise concerns.

Conclusion

Social listening tools have more use than just observing marketing trends. Buzzsumo gives us a chance to take a closer look at the information warfare trends and to see who is setting the narratives in the wider scale. As we can see from the graphs, Russian state funded media outlets are playing an exceptionally big role in forming public opinions in English speaking digital space. Typically, vast majority of all articles written by these outlets on NATO topics are usually highly negative. Keeping in mind the fact that this analysis concerns the English speaking environment, we can suspect an effort to manipulate public opinions towards NATO in the Baltic region, especially in regards to the deployment of NATO EFP troops. This is especially worrisome as in some cases ('NATO Estonia' and 'NATO Baltic States') Russian media outlets garnered over two-thirds of the total engagements over two years.

There is little question that the information narratives about NATO are dominated by Kremlin outlets in Russian language, but it is worrisome to learn that in some cases the narratives are also dominated in English language.

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