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PhD Thesis Booklet

The role of Western experts in Russian political talk shows

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1. Research background, topic selection, and research gap

The dissertation analysed the role of Western expert figures¹ in Russian political talk shows during the first three and a half years following the start of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. Political talk shows are an essential tool in the hands of the Putin-regime, used to convey ideological messages to domestic audiences in an entertaining and engaging way (Tolz and Teper, 2018). Earlier research documented that the Russian media space is carefully orchestrated (Pomerantsev, 2015; Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014) and that Russian propaganda uses TV shows to shape public opinion about the West (Knobel, 2020).

While Russian disinformation is widely studied within the Western academic community, Russian domestic disinformation about the West often remains disregarded. These disinformation campaigns often use 'foreign experts' who are presented as renowned experts from abroad, whose narratives tend to coincide with those of the Kremlin. Investigative journalistic pieces uncovered numerous Western experts of this kind, yet this phenomenon lacks academic research ('Von Beruf Putin-Fan: Russlands "West-Journalisten"', 2022). This research found that their performances do underpin the Kremlin's strategic narratives and reinforce the Kremlin's anti-Western ideological messages for Russian domestic audiences. Given that Russia is going to stay a permanent threat to Europe's security, understanding and tracing the way the Kremlin's ideology impacts Russian domestic audiences is of key importance.

While researchers analysed certain Russian talk-show episodes earlier, their focus was not on the Western experts' performances and narratives. Furthermore, their sample sizes were small, which allowed them to carry out in-depth analysis of singular episodes, but not presenting the big picture, the phenomenon of Western experts featured in Russian political talk shows (Binder & Kaltseis, 2023; Gulenko, 2021, 2026; Kaltseis, 2023; Rabbia, 2025).

This dissertation did exactly that. It observed the entire phenomenon, and traced how these Western experts *legitimate*, *normalize* and *justify* the Kremlin's strategic narratives. The sample size was large enough to draw conclusions and identify patterns, as the coverage of 14 key events from the first 42 months of the full-scale invasion, altogether 114 days was analysed.

¹ Irrespective of their background, personal standing or integrity, I identify these people as "experts" in this work, due to the fact they appear in front of the Russian viewers in that capacity.

2. Research questions and methodology

The dissertation intended to answer the research questions:

- 1) *Who are the Western experts in Russian political talk shows?*
- 2) *How do they convey the Kremlin's strategic narratives to Russian domestic audiences?*

To answer the research questions, first, the Western experts appearing in some of the most watched Russian political talk shows had to be identified. It was done via creating an extensive list of keywords, for Western nationalities and institutions, and professions. The query of 291 combinations of these were run in Yandex along with the titles of the three selected political talk shows. This resulted in a preliminary list of Western expert characters, who appeared in these shows, and it constituted of 11 people. From then on, the performances of these 11 people were monitored. On the examined 114 days, only 9 of the identified 11 were active in these shows.

Then, the talk shows to observe had to be determined. Three of the most watched Russian political talk shows were selected based on the viewership data of Mediascope: 60 Minutes (*60 Минут*), Evening with Vladimir Solovyov (*Вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым*) and Time Will Tell (*Время покажет*). Following this, a typical talk show episode for each of the 9 active, identified Western expert was analysed, to examine how they behave, how they are presented and treated by other guests and the presenters. Based on the in-depth analysis of their studio performances, a typology was created.

For the second research question, the strategic narratives of the Kremlin and the Western experts were reconstructed. As the research compared the narratives used by the Kremlin's official talking heads and the identified Western experts centred around specific events, such set of events had to be defined, consisting of events the public and the producers could foresee and plan their programmes accordingly, and of events which were not expected by them. Hence, 14 events were chosen, according to the hypothesis, that Western experts would be invited to these talk shows to narrate events which pertain to the West. Eight of these events were on foreseen, pre-planned dates (such as summits or elections in major Western countries). In these

cases, 5 days before the event, the day of the event and the following 5 days were examined. The remaining 6 events were unforeseen by the public on these days the day's coverage and the following 5 days were examined. This means that talk shows of altogether 114 days were analysed for the participation of Western experts.

Applying the strategic narrative concept of Lawrence Freedman (2006) in the dissertation, the strategic narratives used by the Kremlin's official talking heads were reconstructed, and the narratives used by the identified Western experts were compared to them. To do so, The War of Words database was used, and the English-language transcripts it can generate. English was chosen, as further coding was conducted using NVivo, what according to the author's prior experience does not handle Cyrillic reliably. A professional translator validated a sample of the English-language transcripts comparing them with their Russian equivalent and certified that it is applicable for the designated research purposes.

The coding of the texts both in case of the Kremlin's talking heads and the Western experts', an inductive approach of thematic analysis was used described as Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006) to code the corpus. No pre-defined codebook was used, the codes and themes emerged through the repeated reading of the text and the identification of the repeatedly occurring patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A robustness check was conducted as well.

The Kremlin's strategic narratives were reconstructed from the performances of four people, Vladimir Putin, Maria Zakharova, Margarita Simonyan and Dmitry Peskov, in the same three talk shows on the same 114 days, to make the comparison as methodologically founded as possible. Then, the identified Western experts' speeches were compared to these. In both cases, the English language transcript was used, extracted from the War of Words platform. Nine strategic narratives were reconstructed, which constitute three major categories. These categories are the "Terrible Ukraine," "Glorious Russia," and anti-Western narratives.

Then, the strategic narratives applied by the identified experts on the same days in the same talk shows were reconstructed, using the same codebook to make them comparable with the Kremlin's official ones.

4. Findings and conclusions of the research

The comparison has shown that the narratives of the Western experts aligned with the Kremlin's strategic narratives, *justified*, *normalized* and *amplified* them. Their primary role is to reinforce

anti-Western messages and discredit the West in the eyes of Russian audiences which they clearly outperform the Kremlin's official talking head in in the observed political talk-shows. The open challenging of any of the Kremlin's strategic narratives is exceptional on their side, and if it happens, it is part of the performance at the end of which the challenger is dominated, won over and hence, their stance is discredited in the eyes of the audience.

This thesis argues that Western experts represent a symbolic resource for the highly centralised information space of Russia. What makes them important for the regime is not only their expertise or presumed credibility, but the performative externality which accompanies their appearance. By staging Western figures as legitimate voices who come from outside the Russian political and information system, the TV can externalise the authority of regime narratives crafted domestically, and can make its political claims seem independently confirmed, normalized and objectively established. This creates a paradoxical situation, where the ostensibly external voices are incorporated into a highly controlled domestic information environment, and where their presence and voice are constructed as external to the regime, but functions as a component of an internal legitimization practice.

This work, therefore, contributes to the works mapping and describing the media presence of foreign experts in the media spaces of authoritarian countries, and the manufacturing of the appearance of independent, external validation for their domestic audiences. Among others, to Kecheng Fang (2022), who described on China's example how authoritarian countries utilize foreign experts to legitimise the ruling party and their policies for domestic audiences, performing external validation (Fang, 2022).

New scientific results

- A new dataset was created listing the Western experts featured in three of the most watched Russian political talk shows, in the coverages centred around the key events of the first 42 months of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The dataset makes the frequency of appearances comparable.
- A new typology of Western experts appearing in Russian political talk shows was created, based on the in-depth analysis of their performance in a chosen episode of each of them. The typology shows 5 typical characters based on how the expert behaves, acts

and communicates, and how the presenter and other guests treat them. The five distinct categories reinforce the Kremlin's messages to Russian domestic audiences in a different way.

Based on this analysis, 5 categories of Western experts in Russian political talk shows were created:

- 1) **The punching bag** (“the Westerner we can win over”) (Michael Bohm, USA)
 - 2) **A Russian with deep understanding of the West** (a person of Russian origin presented as a Westerner, but not identifying with the country and behaving like any other Russian guest in the show) (Vladimir Sergienko, Germany; Alexandr Sosnovsky, Germany; Yakov Kedmi, Israel; Gregor Spitzen, Germany),
 - 3) **Somewhat unserious, but “smart Western guy”** (Jiří Just, Czechia),
 - 4) **Westerner, who got on the right track** (John Varoli, USA, Xavier Moreau, France),
 - 5) **Acknowledged adversary imperialist** (Jakub Korejba, Poland).
- For the second above-mentioned group, the dissertation introduces a new term, *performative Westernness*. As the thesis supports and further develops the work of Kecheng Fang (2022), who described how authoritarian countries' centrally controlled media utilizes foreign experts to legitimise the ruling party and its policies for domestic audiences. This work validated on a large sample that Russia does practice this too, but also develops further Fang's concept, introducing the term *performative Westernness* as it identifies a set of expert characters used for the same purpose, in whose case even their Westernness is performative, as they can be rather understood as “originally Russians”. This means that the identified group consists of people born and raised in the Soviet Union or Russia, being of Russian mother tongue, who emigrated or spent years abroad as an adult, after which they either relocated to Russia or stayed abroad, but they are constantly labelled by the TV programmes as experts from the given Western country (“Journalist from Germany”).
 - The Kremlin's strategic narratives voiced in three of the most watched Russian political talk shows of the full-scale invasion's first 42 months were reconstructed, based on the speeches of Maria Zakharova (Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation), Dmitry Peskov (Press Secretary

of the President of the Russian Federation), Vladimir Putin (President of the Russian Federation), and Margarita Simonyan (Editor-in-Chief of RT).

- The textual corpus of 114 days of talk show episodes featuring were created and made publicly available for scholars interested in continuing the research. (https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1aabqlqwGCT_nT6azGi-q-eEaP-mwmcDi?usp=drive_link)
- The results support the statements of Peter Pomerantsev (2015) on a large sample, who described how performances in Russian state media are carefully coordinated and orchestrated to convey the Kremlin's ideology the most effectively (Pomerantsev, 2015).
- The research demonstrates that the main role of Western experts in Russian political talk shows is threefold with regard to the Kremlin's strategic narratives. They *normalise* them, with often outperforming them in smearing the West (for instance, while the Kremlin's official speakers only accused the West of supporting Nazis in Ukraine, Western experts repeatedly accused the West of being Nazi itself). In this comparison, the Kremlin's narrative can even seem restrained and moderate in the eyes of Russian domestic audiences. They *legitimise* them, while not challenging the Kremlin's strategic narratives promoted by others, only in exceptional cases, when it is part of the performance too. In these cases, the "challenger" is spectacularly win over, discrediting their pronounced stance in the eyes of the audience, reinforcing that the challenged strategic narrative of the Kremlin prevailed, and was right. They *amplify* them, by repeating them a lot more than the Kremlin's official speakers and giving the claims extra credibility by their affiliation and title too. As an example, Western experts criticized and smeared Western media significantly more than the Kremlin's official speakers did in the examined episodes, and the fact that 5 out of 9 is positioned as "journalist" besides being "Western" lends extra credibility to their criticism in the eyes of their audiences.

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