

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

**Masaryk University
Faculty of Social studies**

Applicant

Mgr. Vladimir Đorđević, Ph.D.

Habilitation thesis

The Many Faces of the Contemporary Russian Propaganda in the Balkans: Sputnik Srbija

Reviewer

Prof. Dr. Christian Voss

**Reviewer's home unit,
institution**

Humboldt University of Berlin

The habilitation project addresses the intersection of propaganda and discourse studies and focuses on Serbia. Here, Vladimir Đorđević (in the following: VĐ) is analysing a huge corpus of texts (261 articles, focusing primarily on the so-called 89 op-eds where the opinion of authors is expressed; cf. bibliography pp. 142-179) from Sputnik Srbija as a reproduction of contemporary Russian propaganda in the Serbian media context.

From the beginning, this work makes high conceptual and methodological demands and offers a rich theoretical introduction in the chapters "From Theory to Methodology" (pp. 13-28), "Revisiting the State of the Art and Broadening the Field" (pp. 33-45) and "Identifying and Defining the Propagandist: The Case of Sputnik Srbija" (pp. 45-54).

The manuscript is composed of ten stringent chapters where the longest chapter "Sputnik Srbija Utilization Techniques: Metaphors, Historical Parallels, and Symbols" (pp. 54-119) offers the empirical analysis of newspaper articles – here the very title indicated the three most important linguistic elements.

In a highly convincing way, VĐ succeeds to analyse the language use and the disseminated messages and meanings of the pro-Russian propaganda (minimalistically defined as "management of collective attitudes", cf. p. 13) and to uncover its ideological framework and political background (and the link to the right-wing movement "First Serbia", cf. the final chapter 9, pp. 130-139). Since the ideological framework is polyphonic and not exclusively top-down generated, it can be described as "ideological noise" or "data smog" (p. 14, 15). VĐ uses the method of critical discourse analysis, narrative analysis and of text linguistics in general.

Serbia since the NATO air raids in 1999 seems a well-chosen and promising case-study for the analysis of Russian soft power and biased media: Formally it is in negotiations with Brussels on EU accession, at the same time there is (besides Belarus, of course) no other Slavic-speaking country where Pan-Slavic discourses from 19th century are reconstructed, shaped and disseminated to express the self-victimization of post-Yugoslav Serbia. Since VĐ's text corpus covers exactly the first twelve months after the Russian attack on the Ukraine (February 2022 – February 2023, cf. p. 10), the discussion in Serbia turns mostly on the question of possible sanctions on Russia.

In chapter 5 and 6 ("Identifying and Defining the Propagandist: The Case of Sputnik Srbija" and "Contextualizing the Propaganda: Contemporary Serbian Media Space"), VĐ describes

limited media freedoms and growing authoritarian grip over the media. Sputnik Srbija (cf. p. 33-44) started only in 2015 and belongs to the Russian media group Russia Today. Whereas the European Union imposed sanctions on Russia Today and Sputnik, the channel in Serbia remains unregistered (!), but operates without hindrance. By paying over-average salaries, the channel attracts not only convinced nationalists (and VIPs like Emir Kusturica), but also opportunists suffering from the poor working conditions for journalists in Serbia.

From the beginning it becomes clear that the pro-Russian sentiments of the Serbs have a clear and egoistic motif: Russian support over refusing Kosovo's independence and the guarantee of a Russian veto against Kosovo's UN membership is by far the strongest argument for the Serbian position.

The Sputnik Srbija text corpus is arranged according to the following topics (pp. 60): First the international perspective (international actors and their actions towards Serbia, the impact of the conflict in Ukraine, and Russian actions) and then a Serbia-related perspective (with the aspects: Serbia-Kosovo nexus, Serbia-EU relations, Serbia-Russia relations and Serbia-centered).

As a kind of summary VĐ finally resumes the constructs of Russia, the West and Serbia (pp. 122-129): In the discourse presented in Sputnik Srbija, Russia stands up for the Slavic and Orthodox Culture and for traditional values, it is the morally better civilization (and automatically the "natural enemy" of the West). Russia allegedly is fighting the corrupt double standards of the constantly imperialist and colonialist West (e.g., diversity, cancel-culture etc). The Russophobic and Slavophobic West wants to extinguish all those who reject Western domination. In this perspective, Russia even in its attack on the Ukraine is seen as the purely defensive power fighting for its own survival.

Serbia and Ukraine are represented mainly as objects – with the striking difference that Ukraine is seen as a Western puppet, whereas Serbia is heroically refusing to be controlled by the West. The "fascist" Ukrainians are paralleled with the "extremist" Albanians in Kosovo (and the Muslim Bosniacs in Sarajevo) because they all are abused by the hegemonic West, according to the Sputnik narrative.

My few critical remarks in no way relativize the astonishing performance of the candidate, but are meant to optimize the manuscript before the publication which will find very high international interest and visibility.

-I am missing a historical reality check of the pro-Russian narratives concerning solidarity, brotherhood and friendship. How does the pro-Russian media interpret the absence of Russia during the 1990s, and do they mention at all the Tito-Stalin split in 1948 when Yugoslavia left the Eastern Bloc?

-It would have been desirable to give some background information on recent historical events mentioned in the text, e.g. the massacres of Markale and Račak (p. 92), or the ultimatums offered to Serbia (p. 102; referring to Hitler Germany's collaboration offer to Serbia in 1941) or the Odessa clashes 2014 (p. 114). This should be added before the book gets published.

-For the publication the many headlines from Sputnik Srbija articles should be translated from Serbian into English.

VĐ in his postdoc period has delivered several highly visible contributions at the fertile interface of constructivist Cultural Studies, Political Sciences and Modern History. He (co)edited volumes on Mental maps, International Relations and History of Knowledge and Ideas. The fact that he is perfectly connected in the scientific community becomes obvious from the fact that Dimitar Bechev from Oxford University and Jade McGlynn KCL will contribute to the publication with a foreword and afterword respectively.

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence (number of questions up to the reviewer)

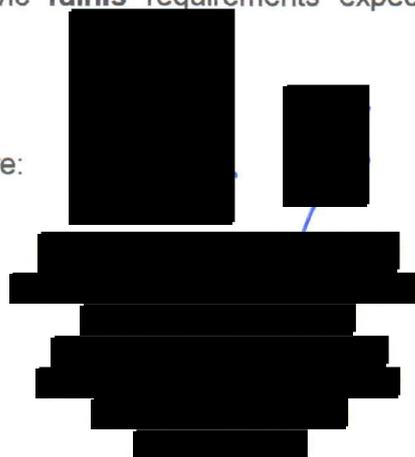
1. To which degree are the narratives you are describing perforated and anticipated by Russian authors (e.g. Aleksandr G. Dugin), and do they differ at all from other pro-Putin right-wing fractions, for example from the AfD party in Germany, from the governments in Hungary or most recently in Slovakia?
2. Do you think that the Non-Alignment (in Serbian nesvrstanost) as developed in Tito's Yugoslavia is still shaping Serbian mentality as the tradition of staying neutral between the Western and the Eastern bloc?
3. How does the narrative of representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church looks like? Do they simply follow the anti-Western narratives, or do they add new elements?
4. Do we find a similar historical revisionism and self-victimization of Serbia as analysed in the Sputnik op-eds in recent school textbooks or in the public history (e.g. newly erected monuments), and how do these trends interfere?

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis entitled "The Many Faces of the Contemporary Russian Propaganda in the Balkans: Sputnik Srbija" by Vladimir Đorđević **fulfils** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Political Sciences.

Date: 12.12.2023

Signature:

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