

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

**Masaryk University
Faculty of Social Studies**

Applicant

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Habilitation thesis

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

Reviewer

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The submitted habilitation thesis titled "*The Many Faces of the Contemporary Russian Propaganda in the Balkans: Sputnik Serbia*" is (most likely) a book intended to be published for global readers. The volume is divided into 10 Chapters ranging from Introduction, structure, theoretical and methodological part over to define and conceptualize propaganda. Next, major emphasis is given to the analytical part uncovering *Sputnik Srbija* (Chapter 7: Sputnik Srbija Utilization Techniques: Metaphors, Historical Parallels, and Symbols). Subsequently, the text is reflecting the Ideological Framework and at the "First Serbia" issue. Finally, the conclusion is summarizing the whole text which is followed by the vast bibliography.

In regard to the theoretical-methodological framework tied to the analytical part and its interpretation approach, the author of the text chose a very updated, original and novel approach. The work rests on theorizing propaganda interconnected to narratives, discourses, memories, metaphors, symbols, historical parallels, language and ideologies (e.g. p. 22-23), not insisting on top-down propaganda only and not related directly to Sputnik Srbija only but to the wider to socio-political context and reality at the national level including peripeties tide to authoritarian tendencies (namely "semi-authoritarian regime", p. 57) and to freedom of the press issue. Shift from theoretical to methodological is reflected by the author originally in a transitive way without sharp borders between the former and the latter. As far as the propaganda issue, the author is focused on conceptualization of that field, nevertheless, although H. Lasswell is mentioned, it is not historical evaluation as the text is primary reflecting contemporary stage of research reflecting definitions and ideas introduced by various academicians with some more emphasizes given to Gregor and Mlejnková (2021) which is complementary with exploration of the current landscape for which is typical propaganda interconnected with disinformation and conspiracy theories focused at current Kremlin disinformation aimed at de-Europeanization strategies (p. 31). In regard to triangle under scrutiny in the text (Serbia, West, Russia in the context of recent Russian invasion into Ukraine), author did not ignore to conceptualize nationalism in its current forms and related to allied phenomena as civilizationism (Brubaker 2017) and pan-Slavism while the West is introduced as significant player ("othering others" language game). As for methodology, interestingly, the author merges together critical narrative analysis (CNA) with critical discourse analysis (CDA). In general, contemporary and relevant authors are reflected in the text which applies mainly to theoretical and methodological parts (e.g. ideology and use of M. Freedon

concept is quite suitable for the research on the field intended by author, p. 26). Additionally, some experts were interviewed by the author of the thesis. The thesis really deals with many faces of contemporary Russian propaganda in the Balkans (Serbia) as is stated in its title and is significantly contributing to the discussion. In its reflections, text is confirming and further exploring number of axioms widely shared by scientific community and finally is opening space for another research – e.g. Sputnik Serbia in media landscape in the country. In fact, there are numerous interesting ascertainments and conclusions in the text as e.g. that (1.) Serbian politics is not as pro-Russian as anti-Western; (2.) high relevance of 1999 Kosovo in current Serbian politics with (3.) analogies constructed and widely shared to ethnic cleansing by that time Albanian extremists and current Ukrainians in the eastern part of the country; (4.) parallels raised on greater injustice against Serbia and against Russia; (5.) parallels between Nazi Germany and current German help to Ukraine not to talk about (6.) interesting reflection on the “First Serbia” and “Other Serbia”.

Although the contribution of the text is, as I assume, very valuable and there is no doubt that strong sides certainly outweigh weak points, I would like to address to the author some (a.) recommendations, (b.) points to be discussed, (c.) minor inadequacies and one issue (d.) to be explained by author during defending his thesis:

a) *Recommendations:*

- “Russian”, “pro-Russian” – it is more accurate to use “pro-Kremlin” or “pro-Putin”;
- by naming (quoting Zienkowski, 2021) trolls, bots, sock-puppets, cyborgs, more players shall be mentioned (e.g. “scammers” - see BBC) and conceptualized (e.g. “useful idiots”) which applies to *opinion makers* from the rank of national experts (politics, economy etc.) which deserve higher priority in the conceptualization of current propaganda theoretical framework as their opinions are reflected in analytical part of the text;

b) *Points to be discussed:*

- Serbian media “space” – why not the “system”?;
- LGBT+ is mentioned rather seldomly in the analysis but is this a case in regard to 261 (see p. 24) articles under research?;
- there are numerous claims in the text by the author about “illiberal” (or anti-liberal) West (e.g. p. 69, 85, 87; p. 123) but is that really the case? Russian propaganda is aimed much more constructing image of West being too liberal (gender, LGBT+ etc.) contrary to “our” conservative values;
- I would suggest that (a) othering others and (b) neo-nationalism (not just a “nationalism”) shall not to be ignored in the theoretical part of the text as both phenomenons are reflected by the author in analysis.

c) *Minor inadequacies:*

- there are very few printing, linguistic or similar errors in the text (e.g. p. 68 inquisition, not Inquisition); there is a complete lack of aligning the text in a block vertically (on the right side);
- in some cases, the author uses numbers in words (“seven”), in some cases as numbers (e.g. on the p. 24), not “40000” (p. 77) but 40 000 or 40 thousands but there is need for unification of style used in the text;
- logic of use of italic in the text is not clear to me (e.g. use p. 14, 31 etc.); “Drang nach Osten” (p. 83) shall be written in italic etc.

d) *To be explained:*

Only one doubt I rise to the composition of the Chapter 7, nevertheless, as it is analytical and longest chapter in the thesis, I put some more importance on that passage and ask author for more proper explanations and defense in that case:

- 1) why did the author not translate headlines of texts analyzed here into English (e.g. in the form of square brackets) and leave only Serbian titles written in latin script?
- 2) these texts are not referred to online source in that passage of the thesis (although they can be easily find by Google without being accessed via VPN);
- 3) author is analyzing, interpreting the way that complete texts are put into clusters article by article, however, most of the articles are far from being monothematic and can be barely put into separate topical clusters – see e.g. in uncovering relations between Serbia and Russia (p. 108-) which obviously reflects other issues as well and text is returning readers topically to clusters already reflected in previous clusters of the thesis;
- 4) there can be, and there certainly are (!) more relevant issues worthy to be analyzed in the separate texts, therefore:
- 5) I would appreciate more proper categorization of the textual corpus generated primarily in sum and divided into relevant topics/attributes;
- 6) there is complete lack of tables, graphs and stats about data collection and interpretation here (but in fact that applies almost to the whole thesis);
- 7) in this part of the thesis, there are very long passages not systematically separated into paragraphs and subchapters which applies also for clusters;
- 8) in this part of the thesis, long (e.g. 81-812 but it is applicable to major part of the Chapter 7) quotation marks are in the text without being put in block and indented (eventually written by lower grade of that font);
- 9) some of the clusters mentioned above rely only on four (e.g. p. 86) or even three texts (e.g. p. 91) – how representative can that fact be for further interpretation?
- 10) due to chosen methodology, although aimed at period of one year (from Feb 24 2022 to Feb 28 2023; see p. 24), author can not reflect any changes in propaganda - if there are any -

in time (e.g. swift from stress to neo-Nazism to other attributes etc.) as I assume that content of the propaganda can not be perceived as fixed.

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

See above at the end of the previous section – (a) recommendations, (b) points to be discussed, (c) minor inadequacies, (d) to be explained with major focus on the point (d).

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis entitled "*The Many Faces of the Contemporary Russian Propaganda in the Balkans: Sputnik Serbia*" by Vladimir Dordevic **fulfills** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of [International Relations and European Politics].

Date: 15th of December 2023

Signature: