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'Model Putin Forever': A Critical Discourse Analysis on Vladimir Putin's Portrayal in Czech Online News Media

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the Czech online news media representation of Vladimir Putin during three presidential elections (American of 2016, Czech and Russian of 2018). The portrayal of the Russian leader is examined using the methods of the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), mainly by the approach formulated by Teun van Dijk. The results showed a negatively biased portrayal of the president, Russian policy and the country itself, which corresponds with the historical-political context of the Czech-Russian relations, and which is in accordance with the Western media discourse. Applying the methods of global coherence revealed that the overarching theme of the coverage is Putin's efforts to re-establish Russia as the global power and to restore the binary world as it was during the Cold war, while the methods of local coherence disclosed many implications, categorizations and the ubiquitous sarcasm and negativity in most of the texts.

KEYWORDS: Putin, Russia, Czech online news media, discourse, analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The perception of any country and its leadership is significantly influenced by the way it is projected through the media. Internationally, the Russian Federation is considered as one of the leading world powers (Taras, 2018), however, the Western media representation of the country is predominantly negative and to a great extent built on stereotypes from the past (Repina, Zheltukhina, Kovaleva & Popova, 2018). The Western media image of Russia has been overwhelmingly negative since the Russia-Georgia war of 2008. Negative media opinions and framing of Russia and their political representatives have significantly influenced the already poor relations between Russia and the West, by reviving the Cold War discourse (Bayulgen & Arbatli, 2013). The position of Russia under

Vladimir Putin as “a strong state that intends to play by its own rules” became a new phenomenon for Western media (Repina, Zheltukhina, Kovaleva & Popova, 2018, p. 562). To construct images of Russia's power, emotive terms have been used by the Western media: imperialism, expansion, and revanchism are commonly used concepts. Security threat, grand strategy, resurgence and destabilizing actor are additional terms used to describe the Kremlin's longing for power (Taras, 2018, p. 2). Vladimir Putin is often accused of stepping aside from democratic principles, and the criticism of Russia's domestic situation is accompanied by growing concerns about its policies in the post-Soviet area, which are seen as neo-imperial (Feklyunina, 2008). Throughout history and under different leaderships, Russia has always been considered as the “other”, the aggressive opponent to the West. Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991), no new rhetoric has been adopted or formed by the mass media. Instead, in its appraisal of “Putin's Russia” the journalists have returned to the narrative typical for the period of the Cold War (Repina, Zheltukhina, Kovaleva & Popova, 2018).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Even almost three decades after the end of the Cold War, and after several extensive political changes, the world still considers Russia as a successor of the Soviet Union, the country is socially and media constructed as “post-soviet” (Etkind, 2014). Russia is implicitly linked to the “occupation position”, while the countries that face the attack of the expanding country are victims. This phenomenon called the *myth of the victim* (Lule, 2001) appears most clearly and unequivocally in the Czech historical context, while the highest point of these representations is without a doubt the events of 1968. The evidence that the Soviet domination still survives as a form of social trauma in the collective consciousness of the Czech nation are the frequent sarcastic connotations related to Russians and Russia, which – among other things – emerged during the analysis. The frequency of sarcasm and irony in the texts can be explained as a coping mechanism (Blaser, 1976; Gornostaeva & Semenovskaya, 2018) for a bad experience, such as the trauma of domination over the Czech nation following the invasion by Warsaw Pact forces in 1968.

Historical context is especially important for this study, as the Czech Republic (formerly Czechoslovakia) was under the Soviet dominance for about 40 years. The country was under a non-democratic political system, led by a single communist party, which suppressed any political or social pluralism of values. The construction of the Communist regime began with extensive changes in all spheres of Czech and Slovak social life in 1948, when Czechoslovakia became a solid link in the Soviet bloc and served the interests of Soviet politics with

no room for own decisions. The result was the isolation of Czechoslovakia from the western states of Europe and the USA, and the withdrawal from more than 50 international organizations. Communist leaders recognized only one model of socialism, the Soviet model, which was considered a generally valid template for Marxist-Leninist ideology (Kaplan, 1991). After a brief period of political liberalization in 1968 known as the *Prague Spring*, the normalization phase began, which completely excluded most citizens from public affairs. People did not have access to independent information. The Soviet regime sought to ensure the public's disregard for politics by raising living standards and intimidation – the freedom of speech did not exist, all media were subject to censorship, while the communist propaganda was ubiquitous (Otahal, 2019). Czechoslovakia remained under Soviet control until 1989, when the Velvet Revolution peacefully ended the communist regime; the last Soviet troops left the country in 1991.

The normalization phase (August 1968 – November 1989) generated two cultural and societal spaces that existed in parallel: the official sphere that respected and was loyal to the regime, and the alternative sphere. The latter not only enabled the Czechoslovak population access to foreign broadcast stations broadcasting in Czech and Slovak, but chiefly gave rise to the so-called *samizdat* media (alternative media) which were produced within the borders of Czechoslovakia (Bednarik, Jirak & Köpplova, 2011). Respecting the human and citizen laws in Czechoslovakia became the fundamental demand of members of the *Charta 77*, an informal civic initiative delimiting the regime in opposition. Despite the very intensive campaign designed by the regime officials that was aimed to discredit them and to prove their insignificance, they did not cease. Instead, their adherents and citizens supporting them, started to publish multiple samizdat periodicals (*Lidove noviny*, *Prace*, *Lidova demokracie*), and other unofficial printed material. Amid the second half of the 1980s, the efforts to actively operate within the alternative media intensified. The attempts were to portray diversity and opinions of the opposition, and to culturally and artistically enrich the alternative sphere (Bednarik et al., 2011).

After 1989, Czechoslovakia and other countries considered as Central European were consistently presented as the countries colonized by the Soviet Union, and the political project of Central Europe was described as the “moral appeal of the West” (Neumann, 1999). According to Neumann (1999), the Central Europe was formed based on Anderson’s “imagined community” that came out of the frustration with Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe. The spirit of Central Europe maintains itself by constant differentiation from the barbarous East (Russia). The core of this political identity relies on consistent attribution of negative characteristics to Russia (ibid). As displayed in Table 1, such differentiation is expressed by morally superior opposites.

Table 1 Neumann's connotations and oppositions related to Russia throughout history

Russia as "the other"		
Binary opposition us x them	Russian connotations	Russia and Central Europe
Modern x traditionalist	expansionism	Russia as the occupant
democratic x non-democratic/ authoritarian/ despotic/totalitarian	"Barbarians on the doorstep of Europe"	CE as the protector of Western traditions
Western x Eastern	Russia as a pupil of Europe (and a potential renegade)	Progress towards freedom, bright future
civilized x barbarous (I., II. and III. world)	social and economic underdevelopment	Marxism x liberalism
cultural x non-cultural (polite x impolite)	militarism, armament (the Russian soldier stereotype)	CE identity as a form of protest against USSR and Americanism in Europe – westernization x easternization
Europe x Asia (EU x China)	totalitarianism	"the Eternal Russia" (totalitarianism)
Market economy x planned economy	representations relating to the future	tolerance x intolerance
independent x subordinate	linkage of political power with persons, not institutions	
defense x offense	instability	
	transition (with emphasis on temporal rather than spatial perception of Russia)	

Source: Neumann (1999).

Despite the decline of Russia after 1991, the ideal of the Russian Federation as a superior civilization and a transcendent empire with a universal mission has remained. Even two decades after the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia's leadership and their international ambitions continue to evoke concern (Taras, 2013). Many experts have examined the way the Russian image has been constructed both nationally and internationally since Vladimir Putin's leadership began (Prizel, 1998; Hopf, 2002; Clunan, 2009; Feklyunina, 2008). According to Clunan (2009) Russia's resurgence under Putin can be explained by the coalescing of traditional security concerns, historical aspirations, and human agency around the developmentalism and national identity that Putin promotes. The so-called Russophobia¹ has become significantly more pressing since the second term of Putin's presidency.

1 The topic of Russophobia has been mentioned in the Russian and occasionally Western mass media; addressed in academic works and raised by different writers and poets for over 170 years (Feklyunina, 2013). Russophobia as "an irrational hatred towards Russia" (Kiselev, 2008) implies a radical degree of hostility by the Other. The term has been bountifully used by Russian leaders in order to create a desirable national image (Malinova, 2013).

This paper concentrates on the media representation of Vladimir Putin (and Russia under his leadership) in the Czech Republic's mainstream media. According to Neumann, Vladimir Putin is the precise example of the "linkage of political power with a person" connotation. Putin's media representations describe him as an authoritarian, non-democratic leader (theguardian.com, July 20, 2017; washingtonpost.com, March 14, 2018; cnn.com, December 29, 2019). In several cases, he is even associated with Imperial Russian history (theguardian.com, March 25, 2017). Most recently, Russia and Vladimir Putin have faced accusations of being involved in several hackers' attacks, starting with the US Democratic party email leakage in 2016 (nytimes.com, June 14; 2016; washingtonpost.com, July 27, 2016). Since then, the country and the president himself have been accused of meddling in elections through cyberspace in other Western countries. I have therefore decided to focus on the Czech media portrayal of Vladimir Putin during three presidential elections in Europe and the US: the American presidential elections of 2016, the Czech presidential election of 2018, and the Russian presidential election of 2018. The goal is, by application of various techniques and approaches of critical discourse analysis, to identify the major discursive patterns used by the Czech mainstream media to portray Russia and its leader Vladimir Putin, and to ascertain whether the Czech media discourse corresponds with the Western one.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS APPROACH

One of essential attributes of democracy is freedom of speech, which in today's society can refer to the freedom of the media. In modern democracies, the media have enormous political power, which is used to facilitate events and create information (Davis & Owen, 1998; Owen, 2017). As sources of information the media can play an important role in shaping perceptions of politics, events and the world. The study of news is one of major tasks of discourse-analytical media research, as most of our social and political knowledge about the world comes from the news we daily come across. A discourse can be understood as a set of categories and concepts embodying specific assumptions, judgments, contentions, dispositions, and capabilities. It enables the mind to process sensory inputs into coherent accounts, which can then be shared in intersubjectively meaningful fashion (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008, p. 481). Fairclough (1995a) defines discourse as a "use of language as a particular form of social practice" (p. 56). Van Dijk (1997a) differentiates between common sense definitions and theoretically complex definitions of discourse. The theoretical definition involves three aspects of communicative events: language use, communication of opinions and cognition, and cognition and interactions (p. 7-28).

Each discourse is part of a discursive order in a certain area of society with a cultural hegemony of its own. The order of discourse of a particular social domain is the totality of discursive practices and the relationships between them (Langer, 1998, p. 21). The concept used in this particular analysis is van Dijk's definition of discourse "as a text in context" (van Dijk, 2001). Discourse is not produced without context and cannot be understood without taking the context into consideration (van Dijk, 2008c). In this paper, I also need to include intertextuality and sociocultural knowledge into the concept of context, as most of the texts involve historical intertextuality and a degree of assumed knowledge. I need to distinguish between ideology and knowledge; ideologies are belief systems shared by members of social groups (liberals, conservatives), while knowledge, on the other hand, is shared by a whole community (the Czech nation). Knowledge is a belief that has been certified by the cultural and in this case especially historical criteria of a community (van Dijk, 2006). The role of knowledge is prominent as it strategically projects what recipients already know or what is still unknown to them, and therefore regulates the presuppositional structure of the discourse (ibid). Cognitive properties such as knowledge or ideologies are bountifully demonstrated in collective discourses – in this case the media.

Scholars have defined discourse and discourse analysis using a variety of approaches: the linguistic orientation (such as Fowler, 1991; Kress, 1985 and Chilton, 1985), others concentrate on the ideological and political dimensions of media messages (Glasgow University Media Group, 1976, 1980; Davis & Walton, 1983). For the purpose of this study, I use the Critical Discourse Analysis definitions and approaches of Teun van Dijk (1980, 1991, 2006, 2008) to demonstrate how these approaches can be applied to the discourse of the Czech mainstream media. In this text, discourse is used as a countable noun indicating "a way of speaking which gives meaning to experiences from a particular perspective" (Fairclough, 1993, p. 138).

Van Dijk (1991) introduces the concept of global coherence, which characterizes a discourse as a whole or a larger fragment of a discourse, and which refers to the overarching theme of the text. Moreover, each discourse contains an overall semantic structure called macrostructure, which is a semantic representation of discourse. The semantic structure of a discourse is hierarchically organized. The most general macro-structure, sometimes called topic (or theme) of a discourse entailed by other macro-structures, dominates the discourse. These macro-structures determine the global or overall coherence of a discourse and are themselves determined by the linear coherence of sequences. His method focuses on the search for those general themes that structure the discourse behind the text: "global coherence is described by what we all intuitively know as themes. Themes conceptually summarize the text and specify its most important

information.” According to van Dijk, this is what “forms the thematic structure of the text” (van Dijk, 1991).

A part of global coherence, van Dijk (1980) also distinguishes local coherence which is defined for relations between sentences of a textual sequence, while depending on global coherence. Another important semantic notion in a news text is implication, as much of the information of a text is often left implicit. According to van Dijk, “many ideological implications follow not only because too little is being said, but also because too many, irrelevant things are being said” (1991, p. 114). Using irrelevant information could be used to form misleading interpretations throughout the text. By examination of the irrelevant information, the implicit discursive constructions might be explained. The methods of global coherence and implication analysis might lead us to discover the consistent patterns of discursive features that imply the ideological position of the analyzed text.

Based on the wide range of diverse methods and techniques of critical discourse analysis that were used by different researchers, depending on the nature of the topic of their studies, there is no sole standard way how to conduct critical discourse analysis. Nonetheless, several authors (Jorgensen & Philips, 2002; Conboy, 2007; Richardson, 2007) pointed out general guidelines on how to proceed when analyzing (media) discourse: “the way to start is to read and reread the transcriptions in order to identify themes (Jorgensen & Philips, 2002, p. 124). Hence, a repetitive and attentive reading would reveal us major themes and patterns of language, and similarities, differences and structures of language of the news would emerge, enabling us to classify the different discourses.

METHODOLOGY

Following the above-mentioned methods of critical discourse analysis, this paper begins with a careful reading of 141 news stories. These texts are closely examined for their macro-structures and semantic notions such as implications and irrelevant information in order to obtain major patterns of discourse, and to ascertain the general themes of Vladimir Putin’s representation during several presidential elections in selected Czech online news media. I seek to find answers to the following questions: what is the overall portrayal of Vladimir Putin in the Czech mainstream media² and how is its discourse being constructed?

2 Mainstream media, the elite media or the so-called agenda-setting media. They are large enterprises with resources which set the framework by which all other media operate (Chomsky, 1997). Mainstream media are usually owned by huge corporations, operating according to Chomsky’s five filters (Herman, Chomsky, 1988). In this paper, four of the selected media are typical

As a sample for the analysis, all the relevant stories from five Czech online news sites – iDnes.cz, Lidovky.cz, Novinky.cz, which are the three most common³ Czech online sources of news, CT24.cz, which is the online news portal owned by the Czech public TV broadcaster, and Blesk.cz the most common tabloid online source – were retrieved through the Anopress archives.⁴ The time frame being July 2016 – January 2017 for the American election, and November 2017 – March 2018 for the Czech and the Russian elections, as the two election periods partly coincide. The analysis sought to answer the consecutive essential questions, and to confirm or disprove the complementary hypotheses:

- Research question: In the Czech mainstream media discourse, what are major discursive patterns in the portrayal of Putin and Russia?
- Hypothesis 1: Putin and Russia are negatively portrayed in the Czech mainstream media.
- Hypothesis 2: The negative representation results from the historical-political Czech-Russian relations.

Throughout the analysis, special attention was paid to the following particular aspects that would lead me to determine the consistent patterns of the dominant discourse:

- What is the most general macro-structure of each text i.e., the overarching theme?
- What information is described explicitly and implicitly?
- What is left unsaid?
- How are Putin and his actions described?
- What is Putin's relation to the theme of each text unit?

When evaluating the results of the analysis, in order to map out the major discursive patterns, I also focused on the way each text was composed, what values were accentuated, the usage of language, and whether the representation of Putin was consistent or transformed with each studied period.

of the prototype of mainstream media: novinky.cz and lidovky.cz owned by the conglomerate MAFRA, novinky.cz owned by Borgis, and blesk.cz is a tabloid owned by CNC.

3 According to the NetMonitor yearly traffic research. Results and charts available at mediaguru.cz.

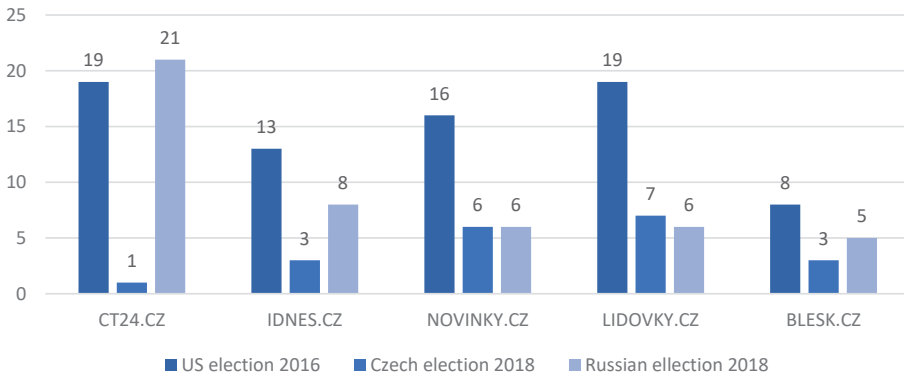
4 The keywords used were these following: "Putin", "American", "Czech", "Russian", "presidential", "election".

FINDINGS

There were 141 news articles in the Anopress archives that met the requirements of this research. A careful analysis of these texts demonstrated the repetition of certain themes, which included the Russian interference in the American presidential election through cyberspace, the annexation of Crimea, Russia’s foreign policy, or Putin’s lack of an opposition rival when campaigning for the presidency. The overarching theme of the dominant discourse proved to be Putin’s effort to re-establish Russia as a world power and to restore the binary world as it was in the past, and the media’s rather negative standpoint and instructions to readers of what to think and how to feel about it. Each election period will be discussed in turn, pointing out the detected major themes that appeared within the analyzed set of articles.

Figure 1 summarizes the quantitative presence of Russian discourse during the period. It displays the number of relevant articles from each selected media of the analyzed sample. Moreover, the graph shows that Putin/Russian discourse appeared in all the monitored mass media to a relatively equal extent.

Figure 1. Representation of Putin and Russia in the presidential elections of the USA (2016), the Czech Republic (2018), Russia (2018) in 5 mainstream Czech online outlets



Source: Author

JULY 2016 – JANUARY 2017

Starting with the analyzed period of the American presidential election, 75 articles were gathered from the time frame of articles from the time frame of July 2016 – January 2017, which mentioned president Putin in relation to the American election. The most prominent theme of this period was the alleged Russian interference into the election via different hackers’ attacks with the most discussed one being the leakage of emails from the private mailbox of the Democratic

candidate Hillary Clinton. Putin was continuously accused of trying to help the Republican candidate Donald Trump to win the election, as he would be a more suitable ally to him in the future foreign policy and his alleged plans to reign the world: "Putin's aversion towards Clinton" (lidovky.cz, November 11, 2016), "Trump is a more acceptable option for Putin's plans" (lidovky.cz, November 4, 2016). The most prominent theme kept on appearing in almost every article of the Czech media not only during the American election period, but also in the articles concerning the Czech and the Russian elections. Putin is described as the most discussed non-US politician during any of the US elections, while the actual American politicians running for presidency are described as his puppets: "Is the Kremlin going to win the US elections?" (lidovky.cz, September 12, 2016), "The Godfather of the US elections" (novinky.cz, September 23, 2016). The analysis leads me to conclude that the articles from this period focus primarily on the Putin-Trump relation, while the language used to describe it is uniformly negative, and the certainty and frequency of Putin's future foreign policy mal intention mentions, if Trump wins, are especially noteworthy. The application of CDA can, therefore, easily lead one to conclude that the media's portrayal of Putin during the American election period is rather negative, focusing more on Putin's future politics than on the election itself. Such redefinition of themes is one of the common media discursive practices and will be discussed in more detail later on.

Textual analysis makes it clear that the media dedicated a lot of space to describe Putin's actions as adverse, when several implications, presuppositions and suggestions were used. Thus, lidovky.cz writes on September 12, 2016, under the headline "Is the Kremlin going to win the US elections?" thereby implying the Russian president is behind the hacker's attacks. The article begins with the Clinton/Putin vs. Trump/Putin relations, mentioning that Trump will be an easier companion to Russia rather than Clinton who disapproves of him even more than the then president Barack Obama does. "Moscow has made the American president Barack Obama sign the deal, that they already proposed in spring" has a rather negative implication. It pragmatically implies noncompliance with demands from both sides, that presupposes that Moscow has forced him to do so.

As the article goes on, Putin is being criticized for not trying hard enough to deny Russia's involvement in the alleged hackers attacks which may imply truthfulness of the allegations. The implication is shortly after endorsed by the statement of Edward Snowden that Russia's involvement "wouldn't be a surprise". The primal presumption of a neutral non-biased tone of the text evaporates as the article (lidovky.cz, September 12, 2016) concludes with comments on the excellence of Russian propaganda, which is not aiming to favor either one of the candidates, but to undermine the confidence in the US democracy apparatus. "Moscow doesn't see the direct gains or losses from when the White House staff

changes but will happily keep on sponging off the election”. The expression “sponging” has a more negative aspect than for instance “profiting”. Similarly, “the Kremlin propaganda masters the use of social networks and plays with the atmosphere of fear”, the very choice of the predicate “fear” implies negativity, leading the reader to conclude that the Russian propaganda is used strictly for negative purposes. On the basis of these lexical choices, both at the macrolevel (according to the headline) and the microlevel, it can be inferred that Putin is not represented very positively in this particular news item.

NOVEMBER 2017 – JANUARY 2018

Moving on to the texts covering the Czech presidential election (time period from November 2017 – January 2018, number of relevant articles: 20), I have discovered a repetitive theme that constantly appeared in the news coverage – the Czech president Milos Zeman’s warm relationship with Vladimir Putin, and a discursive pattern referring to the historical events of the 1970s and 1980s implying a potential threat. Similar to Trump-Putin relations, Zeman’s pro-Putinism was negatively criticized and consistently accentuated throughout the studied period: “president’s grand tour de Russia” (lidovky.cz, November 11, 2017), or “president’s unbounded support for Putin” (lidovky.cz, January 8, 2018), or “the most pro-Russian leader of Europe” (idnes.cz, November 21, 2017). The Czech dominant discourse implies, that Putin’s comprehension of Zeman’s support is that there are no limits in terms of what he can afford towards the Czech Republic and its government. Thus, idnes.cz on November 21, 2017 refers to an article published by the Russian online TV platform *Zvezda* covering the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia of 1968 that explicitly states that the Czech and Slovak nations should be grateful for the past. The article was published when the Czech president started his so-called “Russian tour” visit, where he was gifted a copy of the *Renewed Constitution of 1627* – a constitution that officially subordinates the Czech lands to the Austrian Empire. Similar explicit and implicit references to the past are present throughout the whole sample. Furthermore, the dominant discourse emphasizes the Zeman-Putin relationship, while negatively framing it. Looking closely to the article published by novinky.cz on November 22, 2017, under the headline “TV Cargrad: The campaign is ongoing” referring to the radio broadcasting in Russia, that explicitly stated that the “power of the Czech president is limited”, “he can say whatever and will not be held responsible, which is very convenient for the Kremlin”. In the case of the Czech elections, Vladimir Putin was used to create a negative image of the Czech president Milos Zeman and his presidential campaign. Zeman’s pro-Russian approaches and constant support of Putin were explicitly negatively framed throughout the whole studied period, while the discourse was mainly built on historical references and implications of potential future threats.

NOVEMBER 2017 – MARCH 2018

The last analyzed period (November 2017 – March 2018, number of relevant articles: 46) focused on the Russian presidential election of 2018. The most prominent theme of this time frame turned out to be the “invincibility of Vladimir Putin”. Here, Vladimir Putin is portrayed as the invincible politician, with no real competition. The discourse of this period accentuates the authoritarian attributes of Putin’s leadership, emphasizing his actions such as the limitation of human rights and the freedom of the speech, and his attempts to create his own cult of personality within the federation. Even before Putin officially announced his candidacy, the media already referred to him as the winner of the election: “Putin is looking for a competition!” (idnes.cz, January 8, 2018), “no doubt about Putin winning the election” (novinky.cz, February 3, 2018), “there is no competition, it’s been decided” (lidovky.cz, February 13, 2018), or “Who am I voting for? I bet you know that already!” (lidovky.cz, March 19th, 2018). Czech (as well as international) media claim the Russian presidential election is a farce as the results are known in advance. Putin maintains the overwhelming support of the Russian people, while the state has kicked his main opponent out of the race and sanctioned other candidates in the running (Alexei Navalny). The only concern of the president is a low turnout, which could raise questions about the legitimacy of the election. A significant coverage from this period was dedicated to the rival candidate Navalny, who was banned from contesting the election. The media mentioned Navalny’s support of legions of young Russians who demand change, while mainly criticizing Putin’s regime that is based on corruption: “Kremlin considers him very dangerous before the election...” (idnes.cz, December 25, 2017), or “Kremlin is trying to get rid of the uncomfortable critic and rival of Vladimir Putin” (ibid). These are clear implications of Putin’s undemocratic ways of government that presupposes him being behind Navalny’s ban from the election.

Similarly, as in the previous analyzed periods, textual analysis shows rather negative representation of Vladimir Putin. The electoral period can split into two parts: before the election (Nov 2017 – March 2018) and after the election (mid-March 2018 onward). The tone of the news items from the period before the election is rather sarcastic, continuously referring to the absurdity of the election and its non-democratic character, while after the election, the media focus on Putin’s governing behavior. Thus, novinky.cz writes on March 20, 2018, under the headline “Putin’s successor out of sight” thereby implying that this might not be Putin’s last term as the Russian leader and suggesting that his governance might be perpetual.

Further, the paragraph titled “Presidential life sentence” clarifies that the popularity of the only possible successor – prime minister and former president Dmitrij Medvedev – is very low: “The popularity of the ex-president is now

so low, that not even Russia can falsify the election this much”⁵. The predicate “falsify” in conjunction with “this much” implies that falsification of the election is rather common, while the adverb “not even” emphasizes that such manipulation is common especially in Russia.

DISCUSSION

The analysis has discovered several political implications that were both made implicit and explicit by different authors. It shows, how different events, and the discourse about such events, are represented within the framework of the dominant discourse. Concerning the American elections that is: Trump is openly supporting Putin, Russia is trying to help Trump win the election for their own future benefit etc., whereas Clinton is known for her rather antagonistic stance towards the Russian president, which makes her the better option. On the macro semantics level, the sample revealed the latter of topics that raises from “simple” Trump-Putin relations towards the hybrid warfare issues. Relevant for the discussion is the power of media to define or redefine the topics of the articles that are supposed to cover the election. That is, along the texts, the focus is no longer on Trump’s or Clinton’s capabilities as politicians, but on what it will mean for the world if Putin gets what he wants. By generalizing the topic beyond the American elections to hybrid warfare phenomenon, the discourse defines Putin and Russia as a threat (not only) to the West, but to democracy as well. The same tendency is detectable when analyzing the discourse of the Czech elections. The frequent references to Putin take the focus off of the initial main topic of the article (candidate Zeman) and shift it towards Putin’s mal intentions, while emphasizing the nation’s history: “the Czech presidential elections are also about Russia (...) though the Soviet tanks of 1968 made the Czechs want to break free of Russia” (blesk.cz, January 13, 2018), “the closeness to Moscow still has a taste of collaboration in the Czech Republic” (lidovky.cz, January 11, 2018), or “Zeman’s potential election victory might worsen the CZ-EU relations, and on the contrary – make Putin happy” (lidovky.cz, January 11, 2018).

While analyzing the discourse at the local coherence level of analysis, I focused on the level of specificity used to describe certain events. Undesirable information is usually described incompletely, while preferred information is often thoroughly detailed. One of the most apparent forms of over-completeness is the irrelevant categorization of participants in order to delegitimize their actions (van Dijk, 1993). In this case, the discourse irrelevantly categorizes Putin as authoritarian

⁵ Translated from the original: “Popularita exprezidenta je uz nyni tak mala, ze tolik se ani v Rusku volby zfalsovat nedaji”. The English adverb “not even” refers to the Czech particle “ani”.

by emphasizing his negative actions of the past e.g. the annexation of Crimea, information warfare, meddling into the American elections, or his undemocratic ways of government: "Moscow is facing sanctions over the annexation of Crimea and their military activities in Donbas" (CT24.cz, October 27, 2016), "Moscow intensifies its information warfare (...) experts are warning against Russian internet trolls and their spreading of disinformation on social media" (CT24.cz, October 27, 2016), "The campaign that was aimed to denigrate Clinton, was ordered by Putin" (idnes.cz, January 6, 2017), "Due to the restrictions of fundamental freedom and registration of candidates, there was no competitive environment during the Russian presidential election" (CT24.cz, March 19, 2018), "the only candidates allowed to participate at the presidential election are those, who have been chosen by Putin himself" (idnes.cz, December 31, 2017). On contrary, the undesirable information would, in this case, mean a positive representation of Putin. Such information was not detected throughout the whole analysis. The subtext of the analyzed sample was clearly negative, the information that initially seemed to appear positive showed to have a sarcastic subtext: "Russian presidential elections are not about Putin's victory, as no one doubts that" (CT24.cz, March 17, 2018), "Though the rally was dedicated to the anniversary of the annexation of Crimea, it seemed more to be a mass celebration of Putin's convincing victory" (blesk.cz, March 18, 2018). Therefore, for the Czech audience, the above described redefinition of major topics and the specificity of description may imply an association of a political-ideological enemy (totalitarianism) and a potential threat of a history repeating itself (occupation).

The application of global and local coherence methods has therefore proven that the most common discursive patterns used in the Czech mainstream media are: the redefinition of discourse – frequent references to different topics (hybrid warfare), usage of stereotypes and references to the past (occupation), categorization (authoritarian), negative implications (future potential threat), and the omnipresent sarcasm and irony.

CONCLUSIONS

Prejudgment, subjectivity and evaluability. These are the major features defining the current media discourse of Russia. Essentially, the texts of the news are composed in compliance with a particular interpretative ideological framework (Fiske, 1993; Elder & Cobb, 1983, etc.). Within the Czech media discourse, Vladimir Putin has been referred to as a former KGB agent, the chief of the Kremlin who suppresses human rights, controls the media, the army and the secret services, and is a potential threat to the democracy.

This paper attempted to analyze the media representation of the Russian president Vladimir Putin during selected periods, in five of the major Czech online news portals. Different media types were chosen: commercial mainstream, public broadcast and tabloid. The reason why I decided to analyze diverse sources was to get the overall picture of the Russian discourse in the Czech media. Surprisingly, I found that the language and the tone of the articles of all analyzed sources were analogous, regardless the fact that the public broadcast media are supposedly ideologically neutral and un-biased. The text analysis proved that many of their articles were written in a similar way as the tabloid ones i.e. using sarcasm, irony and negative implications. Using the approaches of critical discourse analysis of Teun van Dijk, the study has shown that the media image of the Russian leader is rather negative. Vladimir Putin is a clear example of Neumann's "connection of political power with a person" connotation. He is portrayed as an authoritarian, non-democratic leader, who will stay in charge of the country until he finds a suitable successor whom he can direct "from a distance" (idnes.cz, December 12).

The application of critical discourse analysis showed the implementation of Cold War discursive practices into the text, by using stereotypes and references from the past. Another common discursive practice of the Czech media turned out to be the myth of the victim, as many notions of the historic Russia-Czechoslovakia relations appeared in the studied articles. The largely emphasized theme – in fact the overarching theme of the whole coverage turned out to be Putin's future malicious intentions and his goal to re-establish Russia as a global power, and re-create the binary position of the world, as it was during the Cold War. Textual analysis showed frequent use of negative implications and presuppositions. The consistent pattern of such discursive features implies the ideological position of the media in the account of Russia and its leader. The findings of the study therefore proved to correspond with the results of other researches of Western media discourses when analyzing the media image of Russia. Even three decades after the Velvet revolution (and the end of the Cold War), Russia's media portrayal remains negative. The president of the Federation is portrayed as the main foe of the Western world and of the attributes of democracy.

Finally, the research shows what literature refers to the *us x them* phenomenon – Putin and his politics (as "them") is described as unpredictable and intimidating, while the Czech Republic and the West (as "us") are presented as endangered and innocent.

This paper brings up the issue of media bias towards the Western perception of the world, which has been neglected in the Czech mainstream discourse. The Russian discursive strategies of the Czech mainstream media naturalize the persisting dislike and negativity towards the Russian nation by reproducing

subtle and routine everyday forms of text that appear natural (van Dijk, 1993). One of the major functions of dominant discourse is to create such consensus (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). A concrete text production (news stories) is based on mental representations of experiences, that is shaped by existing knowledge. In this case, I believe, it is the joint history of the Czechoslovakia and Russia. One of the main discursive strategies shown to be the emphasis of the current discourse as typical, referring to Putin's actions and events in Russia as non-incidental or exceptional, but consistent.

Though similar to the Western media position towards Russia, the Czech anti-Russian stance comes from a painful historical background, where the nationalist ideology aims to defend the Czech nation against any possible attack from Russia. It is precisely through the media discourses that these kinds of ideologies/stances are expressed and propagated among readers and thus reproduced in everyday life.

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