

## The Western World's Image in Current Affairs Programmes on Russian Television

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**Abstract:** This article examines the foreign news coverage in Russia's current affairs programmes. After the collapse of the USSR, Russia has weakened its position, but retained a significant place on the contemporary geopolitical map. The deterioration of relations between Russia and the West after 2014 justifies the interest in study of the Western world's image in the Russian media field. The author investigates the evolution of foreign topic frames on Russian TV, analyzing television content in 2011, 2015 and 2019. The study confirms the hypotheses that since the crisis of 2014, the number of international news on TV has significantly increased, with the negative frame predominating. Polarized presentation is intensified by the infotainment news style, which not only attracts television viewers to the international news, but also supports the creation of mythological discourse in weekly current affairs programmes. The analysis also shows the positive attitude of Russian journalists to the Western world, and admiration and idealization of the Western world's values throughout the study period.

**Keywords:** International news, foreign news coverage, current affairs programmes, Russian television, media frames, Ukraine, Western world.

### 1. Russia and the Western World in a Unipolar World

Under the influence of globalization, the human requirement for knowledge about events taking place around the world has significantly increased and can only be acquired from the media (Lipman, 1922). Understanding globalization as “the intensification of world-wide social relations, which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (Giddens, 1990, p. 64), we also note that it has resulted in “complex forms of interaction and interdependence” (Tomson, 1995, p. 149). So if almost all theorists agree that globalization is the result of media development (Rantanen, 2005), then it is globalization that has enhanced the media value. This justifies the relevance of studying international news coverage.

The question of the relationship between Russia and the Western world is, of course, a very old one. A large number of both Russian and Western scientists have seriously pondered this problem (e.g., Billington, 1966; Bova, 2015; Danilevskij, 2019; Gumilev, 2002; Malia, 1999). This justifies the relevance of studying the Western world news on current Russian TV.

We have to mark the period chosen for the study. After the collapse of the USSR, Russia weakened its position on the modern geopolitical map, but nevertheless retained a significant place there (Demko & Wood, 1999). At the same time the defeat of the Soviet Union in the cold war led to a unipolar world, where the US began dictating the media agenda to a greater extent. During the period between 1991 and 2014, some

disagreements between Russia and the Western world could be observed, but “Moscow had always made strategic concessions in the end” (Lukin, 2016, p. 98). However, the series of political events in 2014, mainly geographically related to Russia’s closest neighbor – Ukraine, again led to the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West (primarily the United States). After 2014 Russia has found itself again in a bipolar world where the Western world and others coexist and Russia is a landmark of “otherness”. Russia’s political decisions of this period are often blamed by the international community as transgressing basic world rules, even though there is an opinion that the West itself provoked Russia “by expanding both EU and NATO and installed missile defense systems near Russian borders” (Sauer, 2017).

During the period of confrontation, the negative impact of the Western world and Russia on each other has increased because of the mutual sanctions policy. International conflict, like any other kind of conflict, arises as a result of lack of communication and is supported or resolved by means of communication, which is proved by the analysis of the participation of the media in similar situations (Robinson, 2002). Therefore, the investigation of the Western world’s news on Russian current affairs programmes during this period seems to be especially interesting and valuable.

The interest of the study is related to the choice of media, too. Television in Russia in the 21st century is one of the most popular forms of media. In 2018 approximately 68% of Russians watch TV every day, 90% – once a week and 99% – at least once a month. At the same time, 71% of them most often learn the news from television, and the coverage of the largest TV channels reaches 99% (Mediascope, 2019). In addition, the Western world’s news will be considered in the context of the infotainment style’s impact on the TV propaganda, which has become a leading trend in modern political TV journalism (Thussu, 2008).

## **2. News Coverage during Worldwide Conflicts**

Many practical and theoretical aspects of international news coverage are well observed (Thussu, 2000). Some of them have been realized in popular media corporatist framework (Aalberg et al., 2013; Curran et al, 2015; Stępińska et al, 2013). Media coverage of global problems or sport events by different media all over the world is another main trend for investigations (e.g., Schallhorn, 2019; Vu, Liu & Tran, 2019). But a skeptical point of view on the image of the “global village” (McLuhan, 1964) is becoming more popular among researchers. National news media maintains their position as the main source of political information and the foreign news usually occupies less than a quarter of the newscast (Aalberg, 2013; Stępińska, 2013).

Besides, studies show that international news is predominantly “domesticated” (Curran et al, 2015). This concept can be understood in two approaches. News is reported in a way that is relevant to a national audience, as well as more categorically: foreign news is framed according to national interests (e.g., Nossek & Kunelius, 2012; Mody, 2010). It has also been shown that the more the news is related to the national interest of a country where the journalist lives and works, the less the reporter will follow their professional obligation (Nossek, 2009).

Contemporary research has shown a serious impact of international news coverage on important strategic government decisions (Robinson, 2002). The national interest significantly influences foreign news reporting and reciprocally, news reporting affects policy. That’s why media organizations base on official informational sources in these

cases (Yang 2003). Thus, framing the international news depends on the foreign policies of concerned countries. The wars in Iraq and other hot spots give plenty of evidence to the connection between the media and government and public opinion (e.g., Tumber & Palmer, 2004; Aday et al., 2005; Ravi, 2005, Vukasovich & Dejanovic-Vukasovich, 2016). McQuail also remarked that the media of Western participant countries was widely said to have failed “to live up to its role of objective reporter and critical observer” (McQuail, 2010, p. 271).

Aday (2017) systematizes the above-mentioned trends in an overview of literature on the relationship between media and foreign policy. This problem has been well studied in Western investigations devoted to Western media and they reasonably demonstrate the dependence of foreign news coverage on elite opinion and priorities (Bennett, 2007). We must note that the study of Russian media has not been sufficiently explored from this point of view.

During a period of conflict the concept of framing (Goffman, 1974; Entamn, 1991) starts to play a crucial role because all the countries involved have their own interpretation of reality. Besides, the framing of the news can work for the image creation of the other nations in the media. Undoubtedly, the media supports and stimulates this process (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Journalists frame the news by choosing words, phrases, metaphors, sentences. etc., and form the image of the country which they speak about (Sallem, 2007).

This article focuses on studying the image of the Western world on the current affairs programmes. The way of news framing of this kind of TV content is difficult to characterize as neutral. In the Russian journalism theory, current affairs programmes are traditionally classified as the analytical content. Their tasks are not just to report the facts, but to analyze, to trace the relationship of events and phenomena (Dolgova & Peripechina, 2019). The current affairs programmes are more locally grounded even in the cases of international topics coverage. Besides, they have to help understand what is happening and explain the background (Holland, 2001, pp. 82-83). By doing that, they assume the existence of an author with the necessary knowledge about the history of the issue, an author who has the ability to reflect and analyze. As a result, even the most objective analysis involves the event’s refraction through the author’s value system and author’s ideology, which may be more or less related to the programme policy of the television channel, and the sociocultural norms and values of the society where the author lives and works.

### **3. Methodology**

Initially, for our research, we chose the period of spring and autumn 2018. The pilot study showed the mention of Western world’s politicians and events in current affairs programmes had a positive or negative connotation and assessment, which facilitated the integration of information into the existing political mythology about the bipolar world. The high ratings of the programmes confirm the audience interest and the fact that the programmes mainly reflect and support their points of view.

In order to show the evolution of the image of the Western world, we decided to extend the period under investigation and to include the period before the deterioration of the relationship between Russia and the Western world. As a result, our sample includes eighteen current affairs programmes. The study was conducted in four-year increments: 2011, the time before the deterioration of the foreign policy climate around

Russia; 2015 and 2019, the years during the turbulent times since the Ukraine crisis of 2014. Each time, three weeks of April were analyzed.

We studied weekly current affairs programmes on TV channels “Rossia 1” and “NTV”, “Vesti nedeli” [“News of the week”] and “Segodnya. Itogovaya programma” [“Today. Results programme”] (2011, 2015) / “Itogi nedeli” [“The week’s results”] (2019) (The program was renamed). We selected three of the most popular general interest TV channels with different forms of ownership. “Rossia 1” is a state-owned broadcaster; “NTV” is a private TV channel with a rich history of independent information broadcasting.

We should emphasize that current affairs programmes take a significant place in the programme schedule of Russian TV channels. Each Russian general interest channel has a unique programme with a famous anchorman. The current affairs programmes are on the air on Saturday or Sunday prime-time and have high ratings. For example, during April of 2019 both programmes held from 3rd to 12th places in the table of the 100 most popular programmes of the week ranked by the leading research company of Russia, “Mediaskop” (see Table 1). It is worth noting that these programmes held from 3rd to 12th place among non-journalist entertainment content as well, thus out-ranking a large number of entertaining talk shows and TV series.

Table 1. Share and Rate of Current Affairs Programmes

Date	Time	Programmes	Place in top 100	Rate (%)	Share (%)
7.04.2019	20.00-22.00	“Vesti nedeli”	6	4.4	13.0
	19.00-20.10	“Itogi nedeli”	12	3.5	10.8
14.04.2019	20.00-22.00	“Vesti nedeli”	7	4.2	13.4
	19.00-20.10	“Itogi nedeli”	8	4.1	14.1
21.04.2019	20.00-22.00	“Vesti nedeli”	3	4.7	14.6
	19.00-20.10	“Itogi nedeli”	12	3.8	12.0

Both thematic quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis of the international news framing were undertaken.

During the quantitative analysis, the proportion of international and national news in programmes was investigated. Among the international news, the following categories were selected: “Russia”, “Ukraine”, “‘Former Soviet Union’ Countries”, “West”, “Middle East”, “South Asia”, “East Asia” and “Latin America” and “West Africa”. Ukrainian plots were coded separately due to the number of news and as well as the role of the country in the conflict mentioned above. Thus, not only news about the Western world was investigated. We identified the category of news according to the main country which the news was devoted to. Other countries could also often be mentioned in it.

As a rule, many of the news can mention several countries during the narrative, especially countries of the Western world. We also found a sufficient number of national news that involved the international political and economic agenda.

As for qualitative analysis, a study of narrative, in particular the framing of the international news was executed. Understanding television as a bearer of meanings which serves the dominant ideology (Fiske, 2010) we assume that during the study period the representation of the image of the Western world is changing on all levels of television discourse coding: reality itself, the ways of its representation in broadcasts,

and the ideology. The state foreign policy has transformed and caused the change of information policy of national television channels. All the levels of the coding would be examined during the analysis. In our point of view, the modification of reality, which is expressed through the deterioration of the foreign policy's climate around Russia, provoked the growing number of international news on TV programmes.

Yet, not only the international political situation, but contemporary trends of the media development should be considered during the analysis. One of these trends - the infotainment as a news style, must be noted. As a result, we formulated the following hypotheses:

H1: The quantity of international events related to Russia will provoke the growth in numbers of international news in the current affairs programmes.

H 2: The negative news frame would be predominating.

H 3: Framing will be more salient because of the infotainment style

During the qualitative analysis we focus our attention on the features of the television discourse, as well as the framing of the international news and journalistic routine in turbulent times.

#### 4. The Foreign News Coverage: The Traditional Working Routine

In 2011, the current affairs programmes were rarely interested in the Western world news. The selection of international topics was always connected with a significant event that concerned Russia as well; for example, the anniversary of the plane crash of Polish President Lech Kaczyński which took place near the Russian city of Smolensk.

It can be noted that the Western world (if you do not pay attention to its foreign policy) is perceived by Russian journalists rather positively and the Western world's values and lifestyle are perceived as the standards to which you should strive. Journalists tend to poeticize the Western world a little as the civilized world, the place where everything is better. For example, while reporting about new Russian medical equipment, a reporter could express the hope that our medical equipment would not be worse than in Germany. It can also be argued that the positive images of the Western world are something inherent in the ideology of the Russian journalist. For example, reporting about the flood in the Irkutsk region, the journalist easily jokes that "the district center has turned into Venice".

Negative framing of the USA, NATO, and some European powers of the old world is situational, connected with invasions of some countries of the Middle East, South Asia and Latin America and NATO expansion to the East. TV plots devoted to the nearest neighbor, Ukraine, weren't found in the sample period of 2011 (see Table 2).

Table 2. International News in Current Affairs Programmes in 2011

	3.04.2011		10.04.2011		17.04.2011	
	"Vesti nedeli" (%)	"Segodnya. Itogovaya programma" (%)	"Vesti nedeli" (%)	"Segodnya. Itogovaya programma" (%)	"Vesti nedeli" (%)	"Segodnya. Itogovaya programma" (%)
<b>Russia</b>	78.7	80	56.25	80	60	75
<b>'Former</b>	0	10	6.25	10	6.7	12.5

<b>Soviet Union' countries</b>						
<b>Ukraine</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>West</b>	7.1	0	12.5	10	0	0
<b>Middle East</b>	0	0	18.75	0	10	0
<b>East Asia</b>	7.1	5	0	0	13.3	12.5
<b>Latin America</b>	0	0	0	0	6.7	0
<b>West Africa</b>	7.1	5	6.25	0	3.3	0

### 5. International Topics in 2015: Negative Framing

After 2014, the deterioration of the relationship between Russia and the Western world caused the change in the reality and framing of the Western world in the current affairs programmes, and as a result this shift provoked the change in TV political discourse. In 2015, we could see a significant increase in the international information block. Even in the plots about Russia, the Western world is often mentioned. We can see a lot of stories about Ukraine. Western and Ukrainian topics are also closely interrelated.

The studying of currents affairs programmes of the state-owned channel “Rossia 1” allocated 30-40% of the newscast to national news and a little bit less to topics that had originated in the Western world’s countries (see Table 3).

Table 3. International News in Current Affairs Programmes in 2015

	<b>5.04.2015</b>		<b>12.04.2015</b>		<b>19.04.2015</b>	
	“Vesti nedeli” (%)	“Segodnya. Itogovaya programma” (%)	“Vesti nedeli” (%)	“Segodnya. Itogovaya programma” (%)	“Vesti nedeli” (%)	“Segodnya. Itogovaya programma” (%)
<b>Russia</b>	45.5	53.8	37	60	27	41.7
<b>Ukraine</b>	9.1	23.1	33	13.3	27	25
<b>‘Former Soviet Union’ countries</b>	4.6	7.7	4	0	4	0
<b>West</b>	27.2	0	22	20	38	33.3
<b>Middle East</b>	13.6	15.4	4	6.7	4	0

The private TV channel NTV allocated about half, sometimes more than half of its newscasts to national news. It could devote to the Western world or Ukrainian topics 20-30% of news items as well.

The image of the Western world in the studied current affairs programmes is nevertheless different than in 2011. The USA is mostly demonized; it is characterized negatively by choosing suitable facts: USA’s aggressive foreign policy led to the

bloodshed in the Middle East and is destabilizing Europe now. Europe is presented as someone who is involved in the conflict that is occurring on the European continent and this by definition is not profitable for it. Europe was the guarantor of the peace agreements (agreements that are not being adhered to) in Minsk for the Donetsk and Lugansk people. In an attempt to implement them, Europe was defeated. New Europe is also mentioned quite often and the features of framing depend on foreign policy towards Russia.

The image of the Western world originates from the emotionally colored vocabulary of the presenter, infographics, testimony and expert commentaries.

Nevertheless, this TV political discourse can be described as defensive — the commentator never initiates, he only responds to a statement or action which is viewed as aggressive in relation to Russia.

A feature of television journalistic programmes of this time (2015) is the process of gate keeping. Journalists select such news items which would never be chosen in any other situation. As an example we can mention the plot connected with the death of Nobel laureate Gunter Grass. The reporter abundantly quotes one of the latest interviews of Grass with the Spanish newspaper “El Pais”, in which Grass calls the Western world to understand Russia, and also remarks that Europe is too dependent on the United States, which is too far from Europe. Or the comment related to the speech of the Director of Military Intelligence General Christophe Gomar in the French National Assembly. He argued that the French intelligence did not find confirmation that Russia is preparing an invasion of Ukraine.

Are these news items insignificant? In terms of the routine journalistic practice, they hardly meet the generally accepted criteria. But they are strategically important from the point of view of the information war, which changes the gate keeping rules, especially for information and current affairs programmes. Any statements, any events related to the issue of confrontation become really important. As an example, we can mention the negative reaction of the US Ambassador to the Czech Republic to the decision of the Czech President Milos Zeman to come to Moscow to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Second World War victory and the response of the Czech President. This story makes the news as well.

Thus, the list of countries that supported a political decision of the country participating in the confrontation, becomes news. The attitude of representatives of any country to the event or statement automatically works for the image of this country.

The information war is changing the rules of gate keeping, mainly for the state broadcaster. These features are more typical for the state TV channel “Rossia 1” as a governmental broadcaster protecting the interests of the state.

The plot of the newscast and the commentary that leads to the topic often differ by geographical location and framing. For example, the commentator can observe the negative framing of the news about the West’s sanctions against Russia, but the plot tells about the successful development of Russian industry. So, the presenter’s opinion remains in the comments and often relates to the Western world.

Simultaneously, I would like to emphasize the preservation of a positive discourse regarding Europe as a territory with a high standard of living, which is worth striving for. This value system has been found in some stories of the programme.

Not only does the political situation affect the way in which reality is presented in television programmes, but also other factors related to the efficiency of TV production and market competition, which have not been canceled.

The research period (2011-2019) coincides with the change in the traditional formats of programmes. Firstly, “Vesti nedeli” have been transformed in the struggle for the viewer and in the competition with new media. Dmitry Kiselev became a new anchorman of “Vesti nedeli” in 2012. And since then, the programme has changed under the influence of the infotainment style as well. In this case infotainment may not mean the predominance of entertainment over information, but significant enrichment of the information with entertainment elements.

The first entertainment element is a bright host with an expressive vocabulary. The new anchorman, Dmitry Kiselev, not only sits, but also constantly moves around the studio. Another element are the documentary heroes of the stories with fixed emotional features. The appearance of the same people with fixed emotional features from one plot to another turns a documentary programme into a series. We can say as well that it is the infotainment style during the information war that turns any individuals mentioned on current affairs programmes into the heroes of a reality show or a docu-soap, and television viewers are waiting to meet them throughout the week. It should also be noted in this case that informing can be described as a mythic narrative in which there are always binary oppositions: the hero and the antagonist, the victim and the savior. For instance, in the broadcast from the 12<sup>th</sup> of April 2015, Kiselev put into contrast the degradation of official Kiev (the first antagonist) and the consolidation of DPR and LPR (new independent republics in Eastern Ukraine). As evidence of Ukrainians’ degradation, Kiselev indicated and showed the oppression of freedom of speech, corruption and brawls in Parliament. The President of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, was described with «steel in his voice and a satanic gleam in his eyes», when he promised to respond to the aggressor if the truce would be broken. On the other hand, in the previous broadcast (from the 5<sup>th</sup> of April) Kiselev had talked about the Russian military as heroes that had rescued Russians as well as citizens from all post-Soviet countries, including Ukraine, from Yemen that had been attacked by Saudi Arabia with US support. According to Kiselyov, it is the United States (the second main antagonist) that is plunging humanity into a new world order, where there is no place for «compassion», «mutual understanding» and «honor». As a result, often the television audience watches the real characters in the analytical programme with greater interest than fictional characters in a series. And high ratings prove it.

We can observe similar trends in “Itogi nedeli”, but slightly smaller. Improving technology expands the possibilities for the visualization of information that, in our opinion, contributes to the flourishing of the style of infotainment in the next period.

## **6. 2019: Domination of International News**

In 2018 “Vesti nedeli” continued to change its format. They updated the television studio: now it has a changing color floor, a large video wall, a lot of plasmas, one of which is in the shape of a large smart phone. Editors are sure that this shape is more familiar to the generation that prefers to use the Internet.

We investigated current affairs programmes in April 2019, when Ukraine was preparing for the second round of elections. Accordingly, a significant number of plots was devoted to elections in Ukraine. The number of Russian news continued to decline (see Table 4).

Table 4. International News in Current Affairs Programmes in 2019

	7.04.2019		14.04.2019		21.04.2019	
	“Vesti nedeli” (%)	“Itogi nedeli” (%)	“Vesti nedeli” (%)	“Itogi nedeli” (%)	“Vesti nedeli” (%)	“Itogi nedeli” (%)
<b>Russia</b>	27.3	12.5	20	11	35.7	18.1
<b>Ukraine</b>	27.3	25	46.6	22	35.7	27.3
<b>Former Soviet Union’ countries</b>	9.1	0	6.7	0	0	0
<b>West</b>	18.1	25	20	45	14.3	27.3
<b>Middle East</b>	9.1	25	0	22	0	9.1
<b>South Asia</b>	0	12.5	6.7	0	14.3	9.1
<b>Latin America</b>	9.1	0	0	0	0	9.1

During this period “Vesti Nedeli” devoted over one third of newscasts to Ukraine news. Ukraine is the nearest neighbor, as it was noted, and such domestication of the international agenda is quite understandable by national interests. Nevertheless, the international agenda of NTV was more diverse than of Russia 1. The geography of the stories was further expanded, but was focused on Ukrainian, Russian news and Western world’s news as well.

In the course of qualitative analysis, we can also observe a decrease in the relevance of the mythic narrative in the programmes, as well as a reduction to the emotionality of vocabulary and the level of confrontational discourse.

During this period, it is interesting to pay attention to the “NTV” programme not only in terms of its transformation under the influence of foreign policy factors, but also from the point of view of efficiency of television production. In 2016 the NTV current affairs programme changed its title, format and the host. The new weekly broadcast, “Itogi Nedeli”, is represented by the Russian journalist Irada Zejnalova. We can observe the growth of the significance of entertainment elements in the programme. A bright anchorwoman constantly moves in high heels in the Studio and reports from hot spots. During one issue she can be in the studio, in London and in Syria and maybe even somewhere else. Direct inclusion here is associated not only with the function of informing, creating the “effect of presence” for the viewer, but also the docu-soap style in order to make the programme more interesting for the viewers, who are waiting to meet Irada, because she is the hero of this documentary series.

Almost all the plots of the programme “Itogi nedeli” are related to international news. We can say that the world is changing again, or at least its presentation on TV. The viewer of the programme “Itogi nedeli” is a part of the large world space, “global village”, where the large number of States, involved in permanent relations with each other, coexist. Often, unfortunately, in conflict.

Irada is a part of the “global village”; in the commentary to each story she mentions a lot of countries of the Western world, the Middle East, South Asia, Latin America or the Former Soviet Union. The average viewer would hardly be able to find them all on a map.

Moreover, the programme looks like a great essay about eternal values: “fear – not to be afraid”; “who is the enemy - who is a friend”. Irada Zejnalova does not inform, but reflects on eternal values, mentioning facts from the international information agenda.

For example, she can say in the beginning: “I would like to get rid of the feeling of threat. There is already a clear desire to catch any minor signs of improvement, because otherwise you can go crazy. And politicians know that in the long term, the image of a friend works better than the image of the enemy”. And then she would return to this topic throughout the show.

Overall, however, in 2019, the turbulence of the relations between Russia and the Western world remains and it largely determines the image of Europe and the United States in current affairs programmes.

## 7. Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis confirms the importance of the personality of an anchorman in these types of programmes, especially under the influence of the infotainment style. Mainly the hosts' demeanor and speech determine the framing of the news in the broadcast.

Our investigation confirmed the actual worldwide trend of increasing foreign news by national television channels during international conflicts. The study showed that the national interest is a leading factor for international news coverage during conflict, a trend that also is true for the Russian media. The growth of international information can be explained from two approaches. Viewers are more interested in foreign news in cases of international conflict, while at the same time, the government in power needs the public's opinion to support its position on the international arena.

The study revealed that after 2014, approximately one third of international topics were devoted to Ukraine. This fact only confirms the thesis about the foreign news “domestication” on national channels. Ukraine is Russia's closest neighbor; the countries have a common economic and political history and cultural heritage, as well as a significant proportion of family and friendly ties among the population.

Starting from 2015, the infotainment style has significantly influenced the foreign news framing by supporting the creation of the mythical emotional narrative. Negative frames dominated, but this trend was more typical for state owned television.

Negative media framing the antagonist follows any international conflict but doubtless does not help achieve an agreement between the two sides. It is important to note that throughout the study period (2011-2019), the adverse connotations by Russian current affairs programmes mainly concerned the countries as participants of the conflict, but the citizens of these countries, when taken apart from foreign policy considerations, were mentioned in a positive light.

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