



THE ROLE OF BROADCASTING MEDIA IN CREATING THE
IMAGE OF VLADIMIR PUTIN

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GANNA ZHADAN

INSTRUCTOR: ANDREW GIARELLI
SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM, MEDIA AND VISUAL ARTS

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that no portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree, or qualification thereof, or for any other university or institute of learning.

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Ganna Zhadan

ABSTRACT

The Role of Broadcasting Media in Creating the Image of Vladimir Putin

Ganna Zhadan

Currently, broadcast media acts as a significant tool for the formation of public opinion in Russia. Its impact has been first demonstrated during Mikhail Gorbachev's leadership, got perfected by Boris Yeltsin and became one of the most important soft powers under the presidency of Vladimir Putin. This study examines three ways in which two of the most viewed Russian political talk shows (*Vdud* and *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*) construct positive or negative image of Vladimir Putin. Using the existing statistics, experiments, surveys, investigations and studies, this thesis identifies three of the most significant factors: platforms of the shows, structures of the shows and images created of the hosts.

By building on the existing scholarly works, examining media, political, social and psychological theories, as well as conducting a survey with 100 participants, this study comes to a conclusion that three of the investigated factors have a significant impact on the creation of Putin's image. Furthermore, it finds that both shows equally use these factors to manipulate public opinion despite aiming for the creation of two opposite images of the president. Lastly, it shows that objective broadcast political journalism is a challenging ideal in Putin's Russia, as journalists perceive their job as a part of the political strategies rather than acting as independent watchdogs. The extended investigation can examine whether these three main factors are universal across the countries, and whether democratic societies, such as the United States, employ similar strategies to control images of their president.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1. Context: An Overview of The Broadcast Media in Russia And Its Popularity

In the recent years, Russia saw a gradual shift in popularity of its dominant broadcast media to the digital way of receiving political and cultural information. A 2019-report published by RFE/RL suggests that 54% of Russians “still get the majority of their news from television, but people under 35 rely more heavily on the Internet and are less likely to trust the TV” (“Where Do Russians Get Their News?”) The remarkable power of television news over the Russian audience was first tested by Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union, as he “was the first Soviet politician to understand the power of the television medium as a political weapon and a means of creating a personal image – power that would allow him to appeal directly to the country’s citizens” (Zassurskiy, 6.) By the 1996 election of the president Boris Yeltsin, the influence of television on the political outcomes was no longer marked as significant but shifted to “decisive” (Zassurskiy, 28.) The power of television continued rising, and by the beginning of Vladimir Putin’s presidency, television became the main source of political communication, outweighing newspapers and commercial media (Zassurskiy, 30) This period also marked the radical centralization of television media, which, combined with its growing political influence, became a crucial tool of the current administration. Since then, along with television media consolidating its power, another information system has been on the rise.

The Internet challenged the TV coverage in Russia – especially, its political rhetoric, as it offered a more liberal, less controlled space, which allowed for the expression of divergent opinions. There have been several attempts made by the Kremlin to censor or block the Internet - the most current being a new law, which allows the Kremlin to “switch off connections within Russia or to the worldwide web "in an emergency" (“Russia Internet:

Law Introducing New Controls Comes into Force.”) The state of emergency is not clearly stated, therefore, is determined by the administration. As a result of the different developments of the broadcast medium, there was a split within the areas of political talk shows. Due to the centralization of media, the political talk shows which did not promote the Kremlin’s agenda were forced out of the public channels. Eventually, many of them chose the Internet as a platform for expressing their opinion, which mainly involves criticism of Putin’s administration. The split produced many heavily-opinionated political talk-shows on both sides of political beliefs. Therefore, in order to be able to critically evaluate information (especially on political topics), it is important to know the techniques the most-viewed political talk shows use to turn the opinion of the public in a certain direction.

1.2. The Rationale for Choosing the Shows *Vdud* and *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* for the Analysis.

For analyzing the techniques used by the opposing political talk shows, the shows *Vdud* and *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* were chosen. *Vdud* is a Youtube channel, hosted by Jury Dud who interviews celebrities on various topics. Over the last two years, the show has been becoming more and more political – Jury Dud, the host of the show, began to mostly invite oppositionist politicians and the supporters of the Kremlin, produced two documentaries on the heavily sensitive and silenced topics in Russia, won the prize “The Man of the Year” in the category of “Screen Face” and started publicly agitating for change (Павлова, “All Winners of the GQ award ‘GQ Person of the Year’ 2019.”) In his acceptance speech at the Award Ceremony of the GQ journal for “The Man of the Year,” he encouraged Russian people to stand against corruption, fake elections, and abuse of power, as “silence is not a guarantee of safety anymore, because they can come to any home even if that home is

located in the Rublevskoye shosse¹ (“Jury Dud’s Speech about the Police Arbitrariness and Falsification of the Elections.”) Dud’s anti-Putin rhetoric was amplified by his recent answer to the question of what he would have said to the president if he was standing in front of him. Dud answered with “that’s enough” (“Dud Admitted What He Would Tell Putin If He Met Him.”) In 2019, the Forbes Magazine acknowledge Dud as the second richest Russian YouTuber (Пищулин, “The Richest Blogger in Russia Was Named.”) with the rapid subscribers’ growth, estimated at approximately 10 million views per episode (Socialblade.com, 2019.) In September 2019, *Vdud* was amongst the Top-20 most viewed Russian Youtube Channels, third in the category of socio-political shows, yielding only to Aleksey Navalny’s and Anatoliy Shari’s channels (“Brand Analytics.”) However, neither of the leading channels fits the purposes of the analysis, as they are not hosted by journalists, but rather by political candidates with their own agendas. Therefore, *Vdud* is the leading oppositional talk show on Russian Youtube, presented by the journalist Jury Dud, which is suitable for analyzing media techniques.

Evening with Vladimir Solovyev is a socio-political talk show on the state-owned TV channel Russia-1, hosted by the Russian journalist Vladimir Solovyev. Even though the show airs late in the evenings, at 11 pm., it still has tremendous popularity and, according to the TNS Global Agency, constantly makes the "top 10 ratings among all television shows” (“Russia's TV Talk Shows Smooth Putin's Way from Crisis to Crisis.”) Apart from this, Solovyev also hosts two other political shows, accounting for approximately 53% of the most popular Russian channel’s content (Mediascope, 2019.) In fact, he set a Guinness world record in March 2019, for spending almost 26 hours hosting live in one week. (“Most Hours of Live television Presented by a Host in One Week.”) Solovyev’s show maintains a pro-Kremlin rhetoric, and the host himself remains a zealous supporter of the

¹ One of the most elite Moscow areas.

current administration. In 2012, Putin signed a decree including Solovyev in the Public Television Council, which served as an endorsement for his loyal journalistic accomplishments (“The Composition of the Council for Public Television is Approved.”) However, Solovyev is not only a regularly broadcast figure but also an important source of political information for the Russian audience. In August 2019, the Russian independent research organization Levada Center published the results for the most trusted Russian journalists amongst the Russian-speaking population. Solovyev was named the most trusted journalist gaining 23% - the result twice more than the one of his runner-up, journalist Andrey Malahov (Дергачев, “The Russians Named Solovyev and Malakhov Trustworthy Journalists.”) Denis Volkov, the Vice-President of the Levada Centre, suggested that Dud was not included in the list because “television remains the main source of information, so whoever is on TV is trusted” (Дергачев, “The Russians Named Solovyev and Malakhov Trustworthy Journalists.”) Out of all of Solovyev’s shows, *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* was specifically chosen because it is the most popular socio-political show hosted by Solovyev with a pronounced structure, ranking the third most popular on Russian television (“Solovyev’s Show Reached the Rating of ‘Let Them Talk’.”) Since Solovyev’s show is highly political and he acts as an important, heavily opinionated figure for spreading information on political topics, the show *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* is a perfect candidate for the following analysis.

Furthermore, the two hosts have directly confronted each other, leading to the question of whether, in fact, they do or do not use similar techniques to promote two opposite agendas. On 2nd September, 2019, Dud released a documentary about the terrorist attack in Beslan, which took lives of 334 people, including 186 children (“The Pro-government Journalists Explain to Yuri Dud Why He Filmed a Very Bad Movie About ‘Beslan’. The Shortest Retelling.”) Over the course of 10 days, the number of views on Youtube hit almost

14 million views, sparking yet another conflict with Solovyev, who called Dud the “degenerate liberalist” and a “talentless journalist” for the documentary’s message, which holds the government accountable for the number of victims and demands reparations for failing its citizens (“The Pro-government Journalists Explain to Yuri Dud Why He Filmed a Very Bad Movie About ‘Beslan’. The Shortest Retelling.”) The documentary serves as an example of the long-lived rivalry between the journalists, who consider each other’s journalistic practices unprofessional and unethical, acting as two seemingly opposite shows with completely different agendas for the purposes of analysis (“The Pro-government Journalists Explain to Yuri Dud Why He Filmed a Very Bad Movie About ‘Beslan’. The Shortest Retelling.”)

1.3. Purpose and Significance

This study analyzes the two most-viewed Russian political talk shows with opposing agendas and examines ways in which they construct opinion on Vladimir Putin’s administration. The thesis argues that the Russian political talk shows *Evening With Vladimir Solovyov* and *Vdud* shape positive or negative audience attitudes toward Vladimir Putin’s administration through the use of specific media platforms, the structure of the shows and the images created of the hosts. To achieve such goal, this investigation reflects on the connections between the Russian broadcast medium and its political system, looks into the structure of the chosen political TV shows, evaluates their voluntary or involuntary choice of the platform, and analyzes the personalities of the hosts as one of the factors for manipulating public opinion. Additionally, this research analyzes the current broadcast media environment in Russia and investigates whether it plays a role in the perception of both pro-Putin and anti-Putin political shows discussed. As a result, this study provides a thorough investigation of how *Evening With Vladimir Solovyov* on Russian public television and *Vdud* on Youtube

promote positive or negative viewpoints of Vladimir Putin's administration, and the techniques they use to project their political agendas on the public.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Context

The current political system in Russia shaped the perception of broadcast media and its functions. According to the Russian political activist Aleksey Navalny, the political spectrum used in the democratic countries to position one's political beliefs is simply not applicable in case with Russia, as parties can only be defined as "independent" or "Kremlin-dependent" ("Interview: Sobchak and Navalny," 30:20.) Thus, for the purpose of this study, we will investigate the political talk shows *Vdud* and *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* using the same spectrum positioning them as either pro-Putin or anti-Putin depending on their rhetoric and ties with the Russian government.

Before proceeding to discuss the specific techniques used by the political shows *Vdud* and *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*, we should demarcate the scope of influence of broadcast media in Russia as well as establish the general media climate, which has been described as "very oppressive" or "stifling" ("Russia : Stifling Atmosphere for Independent Journalists: Reporters without Borders.") According to Slavtcheva-Petkova, "Putin's tightening grip on Russian media includes overt and covert practices of censorship, persecutions and harassment of journalists who voice alternative views, and a great degree of self-censorship, which has become endemic" (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 5.) Such attitude toward the media outlets led to a clear distinction between Russian political talk shows, ending with public TV being dominated exclusively by the pro-Putin shows, such as *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*" (6.) Other political shows, which present critical or alternative views, were either shut down, lost sponsorship or found a platform on Youtube, as in case with *Vdud* (7.) This view was echoed by Vladimir Pozner, a Russian-American journalist, during his interview with the independent channel Dozhd: "I would restrain from saying that media freedom is a pressing issue in Russia or that most people want a different life, because it is hard to miss something you never had" (Sobchak Live: Vladimir Pozner, 39:00.) Such view

explains the popularity of the show *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* and presents a case for relevance of this comparison, as while *Vdud* is an obvious emerging voice of the silenced opponents of the regime, *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* also represents a large portion of the population, which supports it. Some researchers go even further when analysing the Russian media environment, as Sarah Oates, who described the current media system as a “Neo-Soviet model, where Russian journalists continue seeing themselves as political players rather than political observers” (Oates, 1287.) According to Oates, the Soviet and Neo-Soviet models are similar in terms of the high levels of self-censorship and lack of legal protection of journalists, but Neo-Soviet model is distinguished by higher dangers faced by journalists, which includes persecution, harassment and even death (1296.) Perceiving both Solovyev and Dud as political players rather than exclusively as journalists in such complex political environment is important in order to be able to fully grasp the media techniques they use and the reason as to why they use them to promote their agendas.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Secondary Research

This thesis investigates the proposed question by conducting both primary and secondary research. The secondary research focuses on the previous works of Russian and international academics and scholars, including books, journals, articles, research, and studies. By using the information provided in the existing research of various scholars and synthesizing relevant data, this investigation expands on their ideas and provides the theoretical framework for them.

3.2. Primary Research

Conducting quantitative primary research is necessary to understand the current media interests of the Russian population. An online survey consisting of 12 multiple choice questions and three free-answer questions was carried out from the 15th of November till the 25th of December to investigate whether the chosen shows are actually of interest to the current Russian audience. The survey was not timed. The initial evaluation of the most-viewed shows depended on the information presented by the Mediascope Research Centre, Socialblade analytical website and the Levada Centre research organization, but it was necessary to carry out additional research in order to check whether shows' ratings reflect the actual attitudes of the audience. The survey was also conducted to evaluate whether there is a link between the political beliefs of the Russian-speaking people and their choice of political shows, and what exactly attracts them in the chosen shows. Additionally, participants were given a choice of two shows (*Vdud* and *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*) and were asked to choose the one they perceive as the most credible regarding its political opinion on Putin's administration, and which researched component they think brings the show to success. Different online platforms, including Facebook and Instagram, were used to promote the

survey with the aim of receiving a hundred answers from the Russian speakers, accounting for people of all ages and genders. As a result, a hundred answers were collected from the Russian speakers between the ages of 18 till 67. The primary investigation will help evaluate which technique is the most effective in promoting the shows' agendas, as well as investigate further which factor makes the Russian audience turn to a specific political show.

Chapter 4: Results

One 100 Russian speakers of ages between 18 and 70, mostly females (70.2%) participated in the survey (APPENDIX.) The average demographic of the survey was 18-25 (66%), as well as 25-35 (8.5%), 35-45 (6.4%) and over 45 (19.1%). As a result, some clear patterns emerged. 83% of the respondents believe that political shows on Russian TV distort facts in favour of those who benefit from them while 12.8% think that they realistically and truthfully report on the current political situation in Russia. Out of those who have a positive outlook on political shows on Russian TV, 98% were over the age of 45, suggesting that the older generation has a higher tendency of trusting television news. Similarly, 85.1% reported to use Youtube more often than any other media platform. These results seem to correlate with the lack of trust in traditional media sources. Only 8.5% reported to watch the TV regularly, a 100% of those being over the age of 45, showing a possible link between frequently watching television and having higher trust in the broadcast political shows.

Some 74.5% reported that they do not watch *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* regularly, 23.4% reported that they watch it occasionally and only 2.1% (all over the age of 45) watch it regularly. The main reasons for watching the show were: believing Solovyev to be a credible journalist (25%), liking the structure of the episodes (25%) and “other” (50%), which included liking the guests, thinking Solovyev is the only truthful man on television and being forced to watch it with the family. Thus, those who do watch *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* primarily find him reliable and interesting to follow.

Furthermore, 46.8% answered that they occasionally watch *Vdud* (85% of those between the ages of 18-25), 17% watch it regularly and 36.2% (63% over the age of 45) never watch the show. The main reasons included: sharing Dud’s political opinion (19.4%), believing Dud to be a credible journalist (22.6%), liking the structure of the episodes (54.8%), occasionally stumbling upon him on Youtube (29%), interesting guests (13.2 %). In

case with *Vdud*, answers were more equally distributed and there was a greater variety of them.

Then, 57.4% of the respondents reported that neither of the shows truthfully represents the political situation in Russia (100% of them have previously chosen Youtube or “neither” as their preferred platform over television). 12.8% chose *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* (100% previously chose TV as their preferred platform) and 29.8% cited *Vdud*.

A total of 59.6% suggested that they do not trust either of the hosts (100% of them have previously chosen Youtube or “neither” as their preferred platform over television). 31.9% trust Dud and 8.5% trust Solovyev.

Some 76.6% respondents think that Youtube provides Russians with more freedom of speech (71% of those between the ages of 18-25). 2.1% believe that to be television, 2.1% believe that both platforms allow for freedom of speech and 19.1% think that neither of the platforms provides for such freedom.

Overall, some clear tendencies appear: younger people (below the ages of 45) almost exclusively prefer Youtube over television while older people (over 45) stick to the traditional media platforms. Avoiding using television as a primary media source also correlates with a lesser likelihood to trust the political talk shows, the hosts or their opinions. However, watching television regularly shows a greater probability of trusting those who are broadcast. Among those who are younger than 45, *Vdud* seems to be the preferred political talk show while those older choose *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*, possibly because it reflects their own views.

Chapter 5: Method 1: The Use of Platforms

5.1 Theoretical Framework for the Investigation

5.1.1 Marxist Media Theory

Marxist Media theory focuses on ways in which media reinforces the popular rhetoric, generally the one of the dominant class (Chandler, *Marxist Media Theory*, 1.) While the original Marxist theory, proposed by Karl Marx and Frederik Engels, did not specifically focus on media, it certainly got associated with it since the 60's, and received formal theorization by Daniel Chandler, the British semiotician (Chandler, *Marxist Media Theory*, 1.) In the original Marxist Theory, media fits under the category of the “means of production, owned by the ruling party” (Chandler, *Marxist Media Theory*, 3.) From this point of view, media is perceived as a tool of silencing the opposition and promoting the ideals of the dominant class (Chandler, *Marxist Media Theory*, 3.) According to the Marxist Media Theory, “the mass media functions to produce 'false consciousness' in the working-classes,” presenting ideas of the ruling class as an objective truth and eliminating the alternative rhetoric, thus possessing the “ideological power” (Chandler, *Marxist Media Theory*, 3.) From the theory's perspective, media' dependency on the ruling class leads to the dominant ideas being “reproduced not as one among a number of different alternatives, but as the most central or natural perspective” (Chandler, *Marxist Media Theory*, 5.) Thus, media always extends the already existing popular narrative of the ruling party, supported by other governmental institutions. Those who built up upon Marxist Theory – such thinkers as Althusser, Gramsci, Adorno, Marcuse and others, disagree on one of the essential points of the discourse: whether the media constructs or reflects the reality (Chandler, *Marxist Media Theory*, 10.) This thesis does not focus on this specific distinction and will only investigate ways in which the studied political shows promote their rhetoric without going into depths

into the philosophical roots of the shows' agendas. Marxist Media Theory allows to analyze who controls the media, whose rhetoric is reflected and why the specific content is offered on a chosen platform. Essentially, it helps to understand why "some versions of reality have more influence than others" (Chandler, *Marxist Media Theory*, 12.) This theory is crucial for analyzing why *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* and *Vdud* occupy their specific platforms, and for understanding the scope of influence which these platforms have over the target audience. For these purposes, this chapter will carefully analyze as to who exactly is considered to be the "dominant class" in relation to the platforms used and how the chosen platforms shape the adopted rhetoric of the shows. Furthermore, it will be used to investigate how the popularity of the shows is constructed through their respective ties with the dominant class, which influences their impact on the audience. While Marxist Media Theory is essential for gaining a sophisticated understanding of the way *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* and *Vdud* use the public television and Youtube to promote their rhetoric, it is important to note that the theory does not take into account different functions of mass media and other sociological aspects of the society, such as gender, age and religion. All of those might influence the way the public perceives political shows and ways in which it reacts to them.

5.1.2 The Spiral of Silence Theory

The Spiral of Silence Theory is useful for analyzing the connection between media and politics, and how those influence one another. Since the choice of platforms of *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* and *Vdud* is closely related to their political agendas, it is obvious that pro-Putin shows occupy the public television while the anti-Putin shows do not receive any airtime (*Russia's Liberal Media: Handcuffed but Free*, 7.) However, the Spiral of Silence Theory takes the understanding of the government's desire to centralize the broadcast media to another level. One of the key theorists, who studied the effects of mass media on

politics is Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, who tied the “human fear of isolation” with the personal choice to keep one’s political opinions to himself (Donsbach, Salmon, and Tsftati, Chapter 2.) According to the Spiral of Silence Theory, humans base the decision of whether to voice their political opinion on whether it is seemingly shared by the general public (Petersen, “Spiral of Silence.”) Neumann suggests that people assess the popularity of their ideas mostly using media, thus beliefs which are voiced on popular platforms are most likely to generate the perception of a public consensus and crash the resistance without using any force (Noelle-Neumann, Chapter 1) According to the theory, human fear of social isolation is so great that people are more likely to be discouraged against voicing controversial opinions through passive media pressure, which can come in the form of propaganda (Petersen, “Spiral of Silence.”) In this case, the “public” is not perceived as a political community, but rather as a watchdog itself, as one’s understanding that he is constantly being judged and evaluated by others (Petersen, “Spiral of Silence.”) Thus, if one finds himself in the environment where his main source of information constantly broadcasts a certain idea, he is less likely to express an alternative view due to his desire to belong to a group (Petersen, “Spiral of Silence.”) The theory was put to test back in 1965 by its creator, Noelle-Neumann, “during German federal election campaign,” which was described as an “unpredictable” one (Petersen, “Spiral of Silence.”) The research, which was supposed to gather data on the political preferences of the citizens, found that the public support for the two major parties has “drastically shifted” over a short period of time with no change in the political opinions of the voters (Petersen, “Spiral of Silence.”) Noelle-Nuemann blamed such occurrence on the way media broadcasted Queen Elizabeth’s II trip to Berlin in which she was seen with the leader of the CDU’s party, forcing the opposing voters to believe that the CDU was more favored, thus, bound to win (Petersen, “Spiral of Silence.”) Following the broadcasting, the CDU’s rival party lost 20% of their

votes, hence, the voters themselves reinforced the idea of the CDU's victory by mistakenly believing that their opinion is unpopular (Petersen, "Spiral of Silence.")

The study visibly showed that the popularity of the policy, candidate or party is not as important as its *perceived* popularity, and it is enough to convince the public in such perceived popularity to avoid confrontation "even if the majority disagrees with it" (Petersen, "Spiral of Silence.") This way, the Spiral of Silence theory allows to evaluate the choice of the shows' platforms as a "form of social control," which does not only promote a certain agenda, but also discourages the opposite ones (Petersen, "Spiral of Silence.")

5.2 Literature Review of the Relevant Scholars

For the purposes of making a full assessment of the used theories, works of those theories' key scholars were studied. Daniel Chandler provides a Marxist Media theory framework for analyzing media environment in his scholarly article *Marxist Media Theory*. He explores how the media is perceived as a tool of the dominant class, as "the mass media simply disseminate the ideas and world views of the ruling class, and deny or defuse alternative ideas" (Chandler, 3.) The article combines writings of various Marxist followers (including Althusser, Frankfurt School of Thought and Gramsci) on the role of media in setting political agendas, elections and promoting political ideas. This work provides essential theoretical background for understanding why the show *Vdud*, which presents a critical view of the president, is forced to function on Youtube while *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* successfully operates on the most-viewed channel in Russia, Russia-1. Chandler goes further by investigating how cooperation with other parts of the controlled organizations, such as the judiciary, allows for a more profound effect on the target audience. He comes to a conclusion that media does not in itself set any new agendas, but rather

“renews, amplifies and extends the existing predispositions that constitute the dominant culture” (Chandler, 5.)

Similarly, for the purposes of gaining a better understanding of the Spiral of Silence Theory, the work by Barbara Allen was studied. In the Journal Article “The Spiral of Silence & Institutional Design: Tocqueville's Analysis of Public Opinion & Democracy” Allen provides a complex understanding of the Spiral of Silence Theory in relation to modern media, incorporating both theories of Elizabeth Noelle-Nuemann and its origins in the studies of Alexis de Tocqueville, a French political scientist. Allen explains how “a spiral of silence occurs when individuals hold opinions but fail to express them because they perceive themselves to embrace a minority viewpoint” (245.) Allen elucidates that while Noelle-Nuemann’s approach was more sociological and dealt with “human fear of isolation,” Tocqueville believed that such fear’s origins are primarily political (246.) Allen draws on the Tocquevillean analysis by suggesting that in order for the spiral of silence to occur, a necessary authoritarian-like political order should be present (246.) According to Allen, in the 19-th century France, such order was supported by Church, but today, this function is performed by media (253.) This chapter will further those ideas and use them to analyze how can the Spiral of Silence Theory explain ways in which tele-propaganda, skewed pro-Kremlin rhetoric and targeted funding help to promote the pro-Putin views. Furthermore, it will investigate which views would be considered “popular” on Russian Youtube and whether the theory is applicable in case with more independent platforms.

This chapter will explore whether Youtube is as equally accessible as television in Russian households, and whether that has an effect on the show’s respective success rates within different age-groups. In his work *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections*, Markus Prior, the

Professor of Politics at Princeton University, investigates how the availability of certain media content influences public opinion and audience's likelihood to engage with specific platforms. He explores views of individuals who only watch government-sponsored TV channels opposed to the ones who use the Internet, and thus can choose to watch whatever they like. As Prior suggests, "whether people learn about politics depends on the efficiency with which they can find the media content they seek" (4.) By using this specific work and the data from the survey, this chapter will elaborate on the ideas covered by Prior and investigate whether the choice of political talk shows is linked to the audience's access to media or their attitudes toward specific media platforms. Therefore, it will come to a conclusion of whether audience's access to media platforms might affect the success of the dissemination of the shows' political ideas.

5.3 Analysis of the Platforms Used by *Vdud* and *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*

5.3.1 *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*. Television

The Russian state-owned media ecosystem is a not as complex as the European or American one due to its authoritarian nature. According to Freedom House institution, which monitors political rights and freedoms world-wide in compliance with the international democratic standards, Russia scores 20/100 for its freedom, where 0 is the least free and 100 is the freest ("Russia.") This places Russia in line with such countries as Cambodia, Venezuela, Congo, Belarus and Ethiopia ("Russia.") Freedom House commented on the media climate in Russia: "the government has strong control over media environment, and has been able to retain domestic support despite an ongoing economic slump and strong international criticism" ("Russia.") Such media development follows the classic Marxist Media Theory, which suggests that "media products are seen as monolithic expressions of

ruling class values, which ignores any possibility of oppositional readings by media audiences” (Chandler, 3.) Out of many controlled media platforms, “television remains the main source of political information for the majority of Russians, even though its audience is gradually decreasing – from 94% in 2009 to 72% in 2019,” according to the Levada Centre (“Russian Media Landscape 2019.”) All of the major news channels are state-owned, and the government holds a Constitutional right to set up limits of expression and control freedom of speech (*Russian Constitution*, Article 29.) Following Marxist Media Theory, it is logical to suggest that television is a dominant media platform in Russia – a certain “means of production, designed to promote the ideas of the ruling class” (Chandler, 3.) Russian public television still hosts some small-scale oppositional channels, such as Dozhd – a notion, which was described by John Dunn, the Professor of Political Theory at Cambridge, as “lottizzazione” (Hansen, 17.) Lottizzazione describes a regime, which effectively and rigorously controls the main media channels whilst allowing small and insignificant ones for a limited freedom of expression in order to be considered less oppressive than it actually is (Hansen, 17.) By allowing for a minor controlled opposition, Putin avoids attacks on his authoritarian rule while formally obeying the law and still maintaining his power.

Due to the tight relationship between media and politics in Russia, shows on public television, such as *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*, are designed to promote the ideas of the ruling class, thus presenting a positive coverage of Vladimir Putin. This way, the Kremlin controls the “mental production” by supplying its citizens with a very specific worldview, aiming at consolidating absolute power (Chandler, 3.) The channel Russia-1, where Solovyev hosts the political show *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*, remains the most popular news source on the public TV with the biggest audience share, according to the Levada Centre (“Russian Media Landscape 2019.”) For instance, during the 2012 elections, 90% of the voters reported to have received political information about the candidates from television

with 57% of those citing specifically Russia-1, as concluded by the independent research Russian organization FOM (“What and Why Do Russians Watch? / FOM.”) The channel is owned by the Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (“Russia Profile - Media.”)

Evening with Vladimir Solovyev airs Monday till Thursday and sometimes gains additional air-time, as on the 14th April 2018, when the coalition (UK, France and the US) struck Syria; and in the period of February-March 2018 as a part of the presidential election campaign (“Evening with Vladimir Solovyev/ Russia-1.”) The show is designed to support Kremlin’s actions, including the occupation of Crimea and constitutional changes, and is especially rigorous around the time of Russian elections. As such, during the 2018 elections, *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* publicly mocked the only liberal candidate Ksenija Sobchak and dedicated an entire program to the debates between the candidate and the host (“Evening with Vladimir Solovyev on 23.11.17.”) The program aimed at humiliating and disregarding Sobchak’s political credibility – an act, which was perceived by many as “staged” and “planned” due to Sobchak’s close relationship with the president (Luhn, “Putin’s Chic Challenger Ksenia Sobchak Insists She’s a Real Candidate and Not a Kremlin Stooge.”) This way, the show again belittled liberal beliefs of the Russian citizens with the help of a seemingly fake candidate and Solovyev’s coverage of her. Furthermore, during the elections, Solovyev traditionally hosts the debates between the candidates, and per usual, Putin does not participate due to a “heavy workload” (Bohm, “Why Putin Is So Scared of Debates.”) The debates serve as a farcical representation of the “other” political candidates, and were reported by many Russian outlets to be a “reality show” with candidates splashing water at each other, cursing and screaming (Меринков, “Madhouse 2018: Why the Pre-Election Debates Turned into a Balagan.”) By not showing up, Putin does not only avoid any hypothetical confrontation from his rivals, but also seems like the only respectable choice for

leading Russia, backed by *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*. As during the 2018 elections Putin's popularity was estimated only around 42% over the first round, positive media coverage was crucial for avoiding the second one (Bohm, "Why Putin Is So Scared of Debates.") The election results were counted live during *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*, where experts could express their opinions regarding the leading candidates. Those who received the most speaking time approved of the transparency of the elections as Putin's voting numbers reached 76.13% ("Elections 2018. Counting: 60 Minutes and Evening with Vladimir Solovyev Sum Up" 4:02:44.) At the end of the program, Solovyev praised Putin for improving his results since the last elections and acknowledged how various European leaders called to congratulate the president ("Results of the Elections-2018. Evening with Vladimir Solovyev" 3:02.) Such coverage again made Putin's presidency seem welcomed not only by the majority of Russians, but also by the leaders of France, Germany, Japan and the United States ("Results of the Elections-2018. Evening with Vladimir Solovyev" 3:00.) According to Solovyev, the opposition suffered an "absolute defeat" ("Results of the Elections-2018. Evening with Vladimir Solovyev," 3:05.) Prior to, during and after the elections, *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* continued presenting Putin as a strong leader, who is modernizing Russia and is returning the country to its historical roots with minimal use of force ("Results of the Elections-2018. Evening with Vladimir Solovyev," 4:50.) Due to the such pro-Putin rhetoric, television is a pleasant environment for *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*. Justin Lewis suggests in his documentary on constructing public opinion that "the overall effect of media is to suppress active public support for changing the current course" (Jhally, *Constructing Public Opinion: How Politicians and the Media Misrepresent the Public*.) The show *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* actively reinforces the current political structure and can effectively do so due to the public trust in its platform – Television. Therefore, the relationship between the show and the government is rather symbiotic, as it

allows *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* to occupy the most popular Russian news platform as long as Solovyev complies with the positive coverage of Putin. This way, the government reinforces its stability through the use of the platform, and, consequently, through the show *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*.

While it is already clear that in the centralized broadcasting media system, political agenda will have the decisive role in whether the show, person or theme is aired or not, the platform's overall influence on the audience still awaits investigation. *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* must not only occupy the dominant news platform, but also make sure that its audience is perceptive in order to effectively construct a positive image of the president. According to the poll carried out by the FOM research center, the leading reason for watching TV among Russian citizens is to “navigate better in Russian current affairs” (54% of the respondents) (“What and Why Do Russians Watch? / FOM.”) Furthermore, 61% respondents reported to watch TV on a daily basis and 43% cited Russia-1 to be their main source of information on domestic and foreign affairs (“What Do People Watch on TV? / FOM”)

Prior to this investigation, an online poll was conducted, and while its results were not as conclusive, they present additional data regarding Russians’ media preferences. While 19.1% of the interviewees were older than 45, only 8.5% of all interviewees chose television as their most used platform (APPENDIX.) To put this into perspective, that makes up for almost half of the older respondents while none of the younger participants chose television as their main source of information (APPENDIX.) Those younger than 35 have almost exclusively cited Youtube as their chosen platform (85.1% of the respondents) (APPENDIX.) Interestingly enough, those who chose television as their most used platform, were also most likely to trust the political TV shows (12.8% of the respondents) while those who chose Youtube were more likely to consider media a tool in the hands of the interested parties (83% of the respondents) (APPENDIX.) The gathered data suggests that television is

indeed the most beneficial platform for *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*, as it is not only the dominant news source, but also the most trusted one by its audience. The show would have been twice more likely to face backlash and criticism on any non-state-owned platform, but as long as it continues supporting the seemingly popular rhetoric amongst other political shows, it maintains its trustworthiness. Due to the almost complete centralization of media, *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* acts as the carrier of the dominant ideology, thus discouraging the opposition to voice their disagreement. Since the TV connection providers often take it upon themselves to decide on the channels they wish to broadcast, the small oppositional channels suffer from being unavailable to large audiences (ЛогинОВ, “Dozhd Is Losing Audience.”) Currently, the main oppositional channel Dozhd operates exclusively through paid subscriptions, which significantly hurts its audience shares (“TV Rain.”) Therefore, Dozhd is watched only by 1% of Russians, according to the results published by Levada Centre in 2019 (“Russian Media Landscape 2019.”)

Furthermore, according to Prior, people often learn about politics as a “by-product of nonpolitical routines” (4.) For example, one might have the television on while cooking a meal or to wake up in the morning, or while waiting for the commercial to end. Such form of learning has the power of subconsciously influencing the viewers and subjecting them to a specific thought pattern based on the content they watched (Prior, 5.) Therefore, since 46% of the FOM investigation’s respondents do not watch TV for political information, it is important that they still receive “the correct” news, even if they do not actively choose to do so (“What and Why Do Russians Watch? / FOM.”) This way, they involuntarily receive political information and are subjected to the pro-Kremlin thought-pattern. In such media environment, *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* promotes favorable and popular opinions, backed by two other most popular channels – Channel One and NTV (“Russian Media Landscape 2019.”) The show creates a bubble where the pro-Putin rhetoric

is perceived as the most natural one, shaping the “collective opinion formation,” as described by the Spiral of Silence theory (Petersen, “Spiral of Silence.”) However, while just 10 years ago paid subscriptions and TV censorship could have been a significant obstacle for receiving information, in the modern world, it is not. The Internet has come to challenge television as a dominant media platform, and the Russian government continuously attempts to control the new unfamiliar space.

5.3.2 *Vdud.* Internet: Youtube

Despite television being a dominant platform in Russia, its popularity is steadily declining. According to the mentioned above research by the Levada Centre, the percentage of people who believe television to be trustworthy has been estimated at 55% in the past years with the majority of the respondents being over 35 compared with 80% a decade ago (“Russian Media Landscape 2019.”) Such tendency provides a flourishing ground for the expansion of the second most popular news platform in Russia - the Internet. According to the Levada Centre, those younger than 35 find news from the Internet more often than from television, thus forming their political opinions online (“Russian Media Landscape 2019.”) More specifically, Youtube and video blogs are becoming a prevalent source of political information for the younger audience with almost a third of Russians watching Youtube at least once a week (“Russian Media Landscape 2019.”) About 72% of Russians use Internet on a daily basis, and the platform’s trustworthiness is growing exponentially, now being estimated at 20% (“Russian Media Landscape 2019.”) Those younger than 35 tend to trust the Internet more while the older generation uses the Internet less, thus having more trust in the traditional news platforms (“Russian Media Landscape 2019.”) The research has also found that trust in television correlates with public opinion regarding government’s actions, as it is seen as a Kremlin-dependent platform (“Russian Media Landscape 2019.”) Similar

results were seen in the previously conducted survey: 85.1% of the respondents chose Youtube as their preferred platform and primarily cited it as a more independent news space with more freedom of expression (76.6%.) The respondents who chose to view political shows on Youtube were primarily younger than 35 (86%.) Currently, 63% of Russians regularly watch Youtube, which was named the world's second most visited Internet website in January 2019 ("All Internet Statistics For 2019 - in the World and in Russia.") Such results are amplified by the growing number of Russians, who have access to the Internet, which has risen up to 109,6 million people, suggesting that Internet is an expanding, popular medium, which attracts attention from the younger generation (Yorgan, Alyssa. "Internet Usage in Russia - 10 Key Statistics for 2019.") Such conclusion is, in fact, supported by the Kremlin's increasing attempts to limit and control the Internet space. For example, in 2014 a new legislation was passed, which obliged all Russian Youtubers "with over 3000 followers to register as traditional media outlets" (Hansen, 18.) This law came in a package of the "anti-terrorist legislations," specifically concerning the online communication, and made Internet video-blogs subjects to the strict Russian media censorship, which includes "following the rules of the election campaigns, avoiding vague extremist expressions and establishing age regulations" (Брызгалова, "Bloggers Got Equated to the Press.") The law was abolished in 2017 allegedly due to its uselessness, but, most likely, because the government began taking more serious steps toward Internet censorship (Hansen, 18.) In the same year, the government introduced a new policy of monitoring social media in order to track "extremist statements" (Hansen, 18.) Flemming Hansen mentioned that "questioning the legality of the annexation of Crimea, revealing the actual number of losses in Ukraine and harshly criticizing the president" are all considered to be extremist statements (19.) For example, in 2018 a man from Chabarovsk was sentenced to prison for liking a photo which shamed Russians fighting in Donbass, becoming one of many victims of vague "extremism" rules (Зотова, "Imprisoned

for a Meme. How Russia Punishes for ‘Extremism’ in Social Networks.”) Social media users considered the policy to be an additional act of censorship rather than a genuine attempt to fight terrorism, and have already been proven right (Hansen, 18.) Over the past years, the control has tightened due to the Internet’s growing popularity: in 2019, a bill was signed by Vladimir Putin with the aim of making the Russian Internet autonomous and independent from the rest of the world (“Putin Signed the Sovereign Internet Law’. It Will Come to Power In Six Years.”) The centralized Internet will remind the television platform, meaning that the unwanted websites, blogs and media will be blocked if considered a threat. Despite such growing negative developments, they once again prove that the Internet is indeed a significant news platform for Russian citizens. Looking back at the Marxist Media Theory, it is now useful to reevaluate the Russian “dominant” platform: while, undoubtedly, television remains the most popular source of political news for the Russian citizens, the Internet, and, consequently, Youtube, are growing rapidly. It is already established with the use of Marxist Media Theory that the dominant platform is supposed to disseminate the ideas of the ruling class (follow the pro-Putin rhetoric), thus, it is not surprising that Internet censorship is effectively spreading. However, Internet remains a lighter government-controlled space, so it is logical to suggest that its dominant rhetoric will be different from the one expressed on Russian television.

The Arab Spring of 2010-2011 and Iranian protests of 2009 demonstrated how Internet can unite those who cannot publicly express their political opinions, thus promoting democratic and liberal ideas (Satell, “If You Doubt That Social Media Has Changed The World, Take A Look At Ukraine.”) Similarly, the Internet in Russia provides users with the basic knowledge of current political affairs, which holds the government accountable for its actions and allows the oppositional leaders to find support (“Can the Internet Collapse a Dictatorship?”) Back in 2013, the research group PONARS Eurasia, established by the

world's leading political scientists, carried out a research, finding that Internet users are more critical of the Kremlin's actions, meaning generally opposing Vladimir Putin, the United Russia party and mass media, but not necessarily being more liberal or progressive ("Can the Internet Collapse a Dictatorship?") At the same time, the support for traditional media platforms, such as television, was associated with "the higher approval ratings of the president, nostalgia for the USSR and suspicion toward the foreign influence ("Can the Internet Collapse a Dictatorship?") The investigation concluded that there is a positive correlation between using Internet and having oppositional views, but took into account that there is little evidence to suggest that Internet forms views rather than supports the already existing ones by providing the necessary information ("Can the Internet Collapse a Dictatorship?") Thus, even though the anti-Kremlin political show *Vdud* would have never been allowed on public TV, Youtube is still a more beneficial platform for disseminating the show's ideas. By operating on a more government-independent platform, where the audience already has an anti-Kremlin agenda or is open to the discourse, *Vdud* reinforces those upheld beliefs and finds positive response. It is important to remember that while there is no free choice to seek a show which reflects one's political opinion on Russian television as it only promotes a certain agenda, Youtube allows users to choose what they want to watch. Therefore, *Vdud's* popularity supports the presented data, suggesting that many Russian Youtube users hold views, which are critical of the Russian government.

Considering that Russian Youtube users are generally more oppositional toward the president than television viewers, it is possible to suggest that an anti-Kremlin rhetoric might be the dominant one on the Internet. For those who use television for acquiring information on political issues regardless of their own political views, *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* and similar shows will act as carriers of the dominant rhetoric since they face little to no opposition and are regularly broadcasted. However, those who use Internet have

different views. As PONARS Eurasia suggests, there is little evidence that online content forms political opinions, but rather, users seek content which adheres to their political beliefs (“Can the Internet Collapse a Dictatorship?”) Thus, viewers of the political show *Vdud* watch the show because it represents them. As such, *Vdud* does not only focus on heavily censored political topics, such as Beslan, but also invites leaders of the opposition, who are banned from public television. For example, in 2017 Dud interviewed the oppositional politician Aleksei Navalny and discussed his ideas of revolutionizing the Russian political system, as well as his recent anti-corruption documentary (“Navalny – about Revolution, Caucasus and Spartak.”)

Yet *Vdud* does more than simply inviting people with different views to share their beliefs, as in that case, it would have been very slightly different from small oppositional channels on public TV. *Vdud* also invites main Kremlin propagandists to defend themselves and asks provocative, uncomfortable questions. The most famous interview of that kind was held in February 2019, when the second most popular pro-Kremlin TV journalist, Dmitry Kiselev, attended the show. Generally, Kremlin representatives, such as Solovyev, avoid *Vdud* due to the absence of censorship and Dud’s unpredictability, so Kiselev’s appearance quickly made the headlines after receiving almost 10 million views. Topics of the interview included media censorship, Kiselev’s salary and criticizing Vladimir Putin (“Kiselev – Brother in the US, Nephew at War, Pension / Vdud.”) The show did not only aim at discrediting Putin’s actions, but also at discrediting his main supporters as puppets of the regime. Despite Kiselev’s maximal attempts to avoid uncomfortable questions, such as why he praises the new pension reform, which made the pension age higher than the average life expectancy in Russia, most of the viewers still sided with Dud. Top comments included hatred toward Kiselev, calling him a traitor of his people and asking Solovyev to show up, as well, proving that Dud’s anti-Kremlin rhetoric is generally supported on Youtube

(“Kiselev – Brother in the US, Nephew at War, Pension / Vdud.”) It becomes visible that even if *Vdud* was allowed to be broadcasted on national television, it would still not be as successful due to the dominant rhetoric being skewed toward the pro-Putin views. According to the Spiral of Silence Theory, in case with Youtube, users are more likely to silence their pro-Putin ideology due to the general rhetoric being different or find that their ideas are not, in fact, unpopular. Therefore, even though *Vdud* is not likely to form new opinions, it supports the already existing ones and provides a platform for those who share them.

Chapter 6. Method 2: Structure of the Shows

6.1 Theoretical Framework for the Investigation

6.1.1 Semiotic Hyper-Reality Theory

Prominent thinkers like Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes have studied sign and signifier, meaning and carrier, reality and simulation. Semiotic Hyper-Reality Theory finds its roots in the same ideas: Jean Baudrillard's theory of semiotic hyper-reality suggests that “mass-production and re-production cause an event, a person or an object to be reproduced to such an extent where it becomes preferred to its original, hence the copy becomes more real than real” (qtd. in Berger, 14.) This way, the fake object or the replica of an object becomes more significant and more real in the eyes of the audience than the object itself. Baudrillard uses Disneyland to illustrate the point: Disneyland has been reproduced in media so much that it became “more real than the reality it was supposed to imitate, now being even more real than the United States” (Berger, 14.) This theory explains how people, events or objects acquire characteristic, which they do not possess. Therefore, it covers essential points for understanding how an image of the person might replace the actual person if correctly covered by the media. The theory can work both ways depending on whether the reproduction and coverage are positive or negative, thus replacing the real person in a negative or positive way. Semiotic Hyper-Reality theory is especially useful because it is directly concerned with the relations between politics and media. As such, it has been used to analyze “the desire of the Third-World Countries to create political communities which mimic the idealized Western states – a vision, which, in fact, has little to do with existing modern Western states” (Hehir, 1074.) When it comes to resistance – another common point in media studies - Baudrillard is sceptical. According to him, “mass media is inherently non-communicative,” thus able to effectively control the society (“The Chicago School of Media

Theory Theorizing Media since 2003.”) Hence, the only possible resistance channel is by “crashing the transmitters,” whoever they might be (“The Chicago School of Media Theory Theorizing Media since 2003.”) For Baudrillard, the transmitters were the technology – the main source of information, but in our case, the transmitters are the government, as they are directly responsible for the approved, produced and re-produced public political content in Russia. Thus, the theory can help explain why those who watch *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* have a positive perception of the president regardless of his real character, actions or beliefs. Chapter six will analyze how real Vladimir Putin becomes an imitation of his created image on the discussed political shows, and the image created on those shows – the reality.

6.1.2 Propaganda Model: Flak

Another significant media theory, which will be essential for the following analysis is Propaganda Model, proposed by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky in the book *Manufacturing Consent* in 1988. The polit-economical/media theory presents a Propaganda model, which demonstrates the main features and functions of mass media (Herman, Chomsky, 11.) While the theory was originally aiming at explaining functions of mass media in the United States, the model is also applicable to Russia, as it focuses on ways in which media ownership, government control and personal interests shape the way media operates, thus creating an authoritarian media system (Herman, Chomsky, 11.) The model consists of five main filters, including „ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak and anti-Communism“ (Herman, Chomsky, 2.) While all of the five filters will be to some degree useful in the following analysis, the main focus will be on the fourth filter, flak. According to Chomsky and Herman, flak is „negative responses to a media statement or program“ (26.) Flak generally refers to any backlash against the institutions, which are trying to discredit the dominant rhetoric adopted by the ruling party (Herman, Chomsky, 26.) Flak can be either

direct: meaning „official letters, phone calls and emails“, or indirect: meaning watch-dog organizations, „such as the Media Institute and Accuracy in Media, which attack the mass media“ (Herman, Chomsky, 28.) While the second type is more costly, it is also more effective, as, according to Chomsky and Herman, such institutions are supposed to „attack the media whenever they toe the line, condition the media to expect trouble for violating the right-wing standard“ (28.) Flak can work in several ways: first of all, the government constantly produces flak to control media institution and ensure that they stick with the „correct“ rhetoric (Herman, Chomsky, 28.) This way, it „reinforces and strengthens the command of political authority in its new-management activities, trying to contain any deviation from the established line“ (Herman, Chomsky, 28.) In this case, it becomes obvious why non-compliant programs and political shows get silenced even in the democratic media environments: due to the backlash faced from the government and powerful institutions, many find it easier to support the agenda rather than go against it. This provides additional grounds for the adopted rhetoric by the show *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*, as it again suggests that political shows on public television cannot possess differing views. However, flak can also be used as as a backlash toward any media content, including the one sponsored by the government. In this case, backlash will be smaller, as it will most likely not have the great financial support, but nonetheless, it can still be significant (Herman, Chomsky, 28.) This chapter will closely analyse whether the political show *Vdud* in itself can be considered a form of flak – a negative backlash toward the popular rhetoric adopted on public television.

6.2 Literature Review of the Relevant Scholars

Chapter six will explore various parts, which make up the structure of the both shows. In order to evaluate how the structure is used to promote a certain agenda, it is important to understand what comprises the structure of a talk-show. The book *This Is How Journalists Work: TV* by Georgij Kuznetcov explains how talk-shows are structured to evoke

a certain response. According to Kuznetcov, any show on television has a dramaturgical structure, which consists of “exposition, rising action, climax, and dénouement” (59). The exposition includes three main actions, which are “1) greeting the audience, 2) setting the theme of the episode, 3) introducing the experts and guests” (Kuznetcov, 59.) The rising action is the heart of the program, where “the topic is discussed and the characters of the invited guests are explicitly developed” (Kuznetcov, 59.) After the commercial break, those who disagree with the set rhetoric are invited to join the discussion, thus bringing the action closer to the climax – the main point of the conflict (Kuznetcov, 59.) Denouement follows the climax in a form of the conflict resolution between the disagreeing parties, which often can involve physical violence, insults and offensive language (Kuznetcov, 59.) Such dramaturgical method of analyzing the structure is useful for evaluating the invited guests and the course of the interview chosen by the hosts. Kuznetcov uses examples of such famous Russian talk-shows as *Pozner* on Channel One to demonstrate how dramaturgical structure is used to “accurately direct the flow of thoughts of the invited people, to identify the scope of the problem and direct the behavior of the presenter” (59.) Such method of analysis indirectly suggests that the structure can be adjusted to fit a certain agenda through manipulation of its components, which will be useful for the following evaluation. For example, Dud’s interviews are structured in a way which puts the most provocative questions closer to the end, bringing the narrative to the climax and often ending the conversation at a point, which reinforces Dud’s agenda. Even though *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* uses slightly different dramaturgical concepts, it follows a similar pattern, where climax happens near the end (usually, in a form of a verbal or physical fight), ending up in a denouement, which reiterates the show’s rhetoric. Apart from that, Kuznetcov offers some insights into the true purposes of the analyzed shows. He distinguishes TV-shows according to 13 categories, where *Vdud* and *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* fit under the “information-analytical program,” which is a

“weekly or monthly (and sometimes daily) commentary on events of importance to the audience and their overtly subjective interpretation (as opposed to purely news programs striving for objectivity). Function - the formation of public opinion” (Kuznetcov, 248). Such approach provides a scope for understanding goals of the both shows. Furthermore, it once more proves that supplying the audience with objective information is not the main purpose of *Vdud* and *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* while presenting a certain version of reality is. Kuznetcov does not focus much on the agendas of the show or how the structure helps to promote a certain narrative, but rather deconstructs the main components of the talk-shows. Therefore, other scholars will be used for analyzing how the structure of the show plays into supporting a certain rhetoric.

6.3 Structure of the Show *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* and *Vdud* as a Method of Constructing Public Opinion on Vladimir Putin

6.3.1. Structure of the Show *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*

6.3.1.1. Topics

Evening with Vladimir Solovyev is a 1,5 hour-long political commentary on the current events world-wide. According to Anna Kachkayeva, “*Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* supports the existing atmosphere and heats it up. It supports the overall feeling of accepting the public consensus” (“Russian Television Talk Shows Smooth Putin's Way from Crisis to Crisis.”) As Russia is a large country, “the show first goes live in the Far East region, giving the producers about 8 hours to edit out any questionable content before the show airs in Moscow” (“Russian Television Talk Shows Smooth Putin's Way from Crisis to Crisis.”) For example, once, two hosts on Channel One made an unpleasant remark about Solovyev to which he answered in his show: “I know what to do to avoid getting on

Mirotvorec². It's enough to disgustingly joke about me" ("Solovyev Spitted on Urgant's Jokes.") Later, Solovyev requested for this sentence to be removed, and the episode aired in Moscow without it ("Solovyev Spitted on Urgant's Jokes.") This way, the team ensures the episode is clean of any controversy or questionable content.

The topics for the show are usually chosen from the current agenda, but, according to one of the show's crew members, always to some extent end up being "let's do Ukraine" ("Как Работает Пропаганда На Российском ТВ: Объясняем На Примерах Из Телешоу.") While a few years ago such theme even received a special code name of the "relevant-Ukraine" ("Ukraina-aktualka"), today it is losing its relevance for the Russian audience based on the show's ratings due to the cooling tensions ("How Propaganda Works on Russian TV: Explained with Examples from the TV Shows.") Currently, most of the show's topics are centred around foreign policy, negotiations regarding Donbas, and the United States. Similarly, the show focuses on "building a negative image of the EU," positioning the EU as "a puppet of the US and supporters of the revival of fascism" (Pashnetsev 149.) Such rhetoric is important for building a positive view of the president, as it prepares the audience for the direction of the foreign and domestic affairs. Furthermore, it has been used to justify warfare, poverty and even failed policies by taking the guilt off the Kremlin, and, subsequently, of Putin. For example, it has been evidently illustrated during the war in Donbas, when the disinformation in political talk shows was at its highest. In November 2019, Solovyev reiterated that Ukraine is to blame for the outbreak of the war and denied the presence of Russian military troops in Donbas, backing up the Kremlin's position ("Ukraine Started the War in Donbas, It Is an Aggressor.") Since the beginning of Putin's presidency, Putin's Russia was perceived as a strong, uncompromising power by its citizens,

² Mirotvorec is a Ukrainian website, which lists all people responsible for crimes against peace in Ukraine and its citizens. Its database includes people working for the Kremlin, those who openly supported annexation of Ukraine, separatists and many others.

as many saw Putin as a “strong, decisive, sovereign leader” (Troianovski, “How the Kremlin Crafted a Popular Brand: Putin.”) For those who receive political information primarily via television, Russian possible involvement in Eastern Ukraine will be justified either way, as Ukraine is covered as an aggressor and a threat. Therefore, continuous negative representation of Ukraine creates a scenario where Putin’s Russia must crush its enemy to prove its power. This then shifts the image of Putin as a violent dictator to a man who protects the image of his country and well-being of his citizens, thus constructing a new reality for the Russian citizens, as dictated by the Semiotic Hyperreality Theory. If topics for the show were more “local” and focused more on Russia’s domestic problems, then it would have been harder to blame the EU, NATO or Ukraine for their appearance as the focus would have shifted inside – toward the Kremlin. Therefore, *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* does not only support the pro-Kremlin rhetoric, but also continuously spreads disinformation in order to sustain and distribute a positive image of the president. For this reason, topics for the show are always chosen based on the “relevant, usually non-domestic news” – not so much because they are newsworthy, but because they need justification, media support and a specific viewpoint, which will influence public opinion on the president Vladimir Putin (Robinson, “BBC Monitoring – Essential Media Insight.”)

6.3.1.2. Guests

According to *The Insider*³, Solovyev receives specific instructions from the government’s administration regarding the content of his shows and guests who he can or cannot invite (Адамова, “Confession of the Propagandist. Part II. How Are Political Talk Shows Made on the State TV.”) The format of the show suggests that eight speakers should always be present on stage and one of Solovyev’s guests should act a victim of the host –

³ Russian research and analytical website.

being verbally and sometimes physically criticized for his liberal beliefs. Over the past years, Solovyev has had a regular panel of the “oppositional” guests. The show is scripted to encourage clashes between the opposing sides as it is “the easiest way to get the audience’s response” (ЧЕЧОКОВ “Secrets of Political TV Shows: Applauses - On Command, Villains – On A Salary, and Fights - Strictly Once Per Quarter.”) The rest of the guests are designed to support the pro-Kremlin rhetoric and furtherly judge and humiliate the oppositional representatives. According to Sofija Adamova, a Russian journalist who has worked for various political talk-shows as a casting director, the main struggle of the direction is to “find a liberal who will scold Russia, but so that no one gets in trouble” (“Confession of the Propagandist. Part II. How Are Political Talk Shows Made on the State TV.”) That means that mildly attacking the USSR and Russia is generally acceptable, but harshly criticizing the situation in Ukraine, encouraging rallies or calling out Putin are all taboos (ЧЕЧОКОВ “Secrets of Political TV Shows: Applauses - On Command, Villains – On A Salary, and Fights - Strictly Once Per Quarter.”) Such guests have even received a special Russian term of *liberasts* – an offensive word, which is used to express aversion toward the neo-liberal reforms and representatives in Russia (“Liberast – Is... What Is Liberast?”) Generally, such guests are expected to eventually make fools of themselves to reiterate the wretchedness of their beliefs. For example, one of the American experts noted Russian involvement in the American election of 2016 (“Solovyev Destroyed the American, Who Decided to Discuss Russian Hackers with Him.”) When asked for his proof, the expert failed to give any reasonable answer except for “three sources are claiming that,” which allowed Solovyev to ridicule his competency (“Solovyev Destroyed the American, Who Decided to Discuss Russian Hackers with Him.”)

Furthermore, guests have been defined based on how much they scream – Adamova’s job included getting on the candidates’ nerves during the casting to see if they

would react to a specific degree (Адамова, “Confession of the Propagandist. Part II. How Are Political Talk Shows Made on the State TV.”) The show’s policy was described as: “does he scream? If not, then we don’t need him” (Адамова, “Confession of the Propagandist. Part II. How Are Political Talk Shows Made on the State TV.”) Generally, the episode is considered a success if by the end of the program everyone starts cursing at the top of their lungs, which makes it hard to receive information and depicts the oppositional guests in the worst possible colors (Адамова, “Confession of the Propagandist. Part II. How Are Political Talk Shows Made on the State TV.”) At the same time, it brings the show to a logical conclusion – a denouement, which labels the participants as “winners” and “losers” – those, whose beliefs are supported and those, whose beliefs are ridiculed.

Evening with Vladimir Solovyev has a regular panel of “victims” – Jakub Korejba from Poland, Michael Bom from the United States and Viacheslav Kovtun from Ukraine (*Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*.) The guests’ nationalities are chosen very carefully, as they are meant to represent the countries (or entities), which *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* stands against – the EU, the USA and Ukraine. The show covers their expenses, including plane tickets and hotels, but individual salaries vary based on the frequency of their participation (Голованов, “Anti-Russian Experts on the TV Shows Are Ready to Bear Beatings For A Good Fee.”) It is important to note that the rest of the invited guests – those who are supposed to support the regime – regularly change and do not matter as much because they fulfill their purpose by opposing themselves to Korejba, Bom and Kovtun.

The most “expensive” oppositional expert on *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* is Viacheslav Kovtun who “serves the role of the Ukrainian political scientist, but has in fact moved to Russia from Ukraine as a temporarily unemployed in 2014” (Адамова, “Confession of the Propagandist. Part II. How Are Political Talk Shows Made on the State

TV.”) Kovtun is being presented as an unstable and radical pro-Ukrainian fanatic yet he is only allowed to “scream about the pre-arranged subjects” (Адамова, “Confession of the Propagandist. Part II. How Are Political Talk Shows Made on the State TV.”) Putin’s general stand on Ukraine includes portraying Ukraine as the enemy, arguing that Russian soldiers are not present in Donbas and denying the occupation of Crimea (Bennetts, “Putin Changes the Channel on Ukraine.”) Kovtun acts as the representative of all these points – he reinforces Putin’s rhetoric through radical, nationalist and often anti-Russian expressions, thus representing Ukraine as hostile and vindictive. For example, once, Jury Kot, the Ukrainian journalist living in Russia, said that his son represents a different, non-radical kind of the Ukrainian youth, to which Kovtun answered: “We will check what kind of son that is.” (“On Russian TV, a Ukrainian Journalist Attacked the Ukrainian Politologist-Nationalist.”) The episode ended with a physical fight between the two men, representing both Kovtun and the Ukrainian regime as oppressive and threatening. Along with Bom and Korejba, Kovtun has been referred to as the “paid Russian enemy,” who turns into a reasonable, peaceful man patiently waiting for his paycheck the second the program is over (Адамова, “Confession of the Propagandist. Part II. How Are Political Talk Shows Made on the State TV.”) There has been a relative struggle in finding a person from Ukraine who would be the right fit for *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*, as Ukraine remains a dangerous, heavily-censored topic. Therefore, Kovtun continues attending every second or third episode of the show (Адамова, “Confession of the Propagandist. Part II. How Are Political Talk Shows Made on the State TV.”) His earnings are estimated around 10000\$ a month and he is well-known as “the pathetic supporter of Ukraine” due to the caricatured, harmful support for his homeland (“Journalistic Investigation Reveals How ‘Ukrainian Experts’ Appear on Russian Propaganda TV Shows.”)

The second most popular guest is the American Michael Bom, who came to Russia in the beginning of the 2000s to work as an insurance agent (Адамова, “Confession of the Propagandist. Part II. How Are Political Talk Shows Made on the State TV.”) Bom is being “regularly presented as an independent journalist yet he has never worked as a journalist except for briefly writing for *The Moscow Times*,” which again suggests that his main function on the show is far from balancing the discussion (Адамова, “Confession of the Propagandist. Part II. How Are Political Talk Shows Made on the State TV.”) Bom is also known as the “favorite whipping boy,” as he regularly allows for a hostile and often violent attitude toward him (Rothrock, “Russian TV's Favorite Chumps.”) Bom serves the purpose of being the “evil American” and supports the rhetoric, which is similar to the one prevalent during the Cold War (Голованов, “Anti-Russian Experts on the TV Shows Are Ready to Bear Beatings for A Good Fee.”) Today, the US continues being an excuse for Russia’s misfortunes, and despite a short improvement in the relations after the election of Donald Trump, Putin still sees the relationship as worsening (Osborn, “Putin Says U.S.-Russia Relations Are Getting 'Worse and Worse'”) Some of the common disinformation cases in *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* about the USA included “NATO circling around Russia” and false claims about the American hostility toward Russia in the form of sanctions (“The Evil West.”) Bom weakly denies such claims, but usually, just looks away in humiliation, thus leaving the host and pro-Putin guests to blame him for their misfortunes. One of the recent skirmishes included Bom hinting that Russian hackers were directly responsible for rigging the 2016 election while being on the phone with the Kremlin (Максимович, “Hacker, I am the Kremlin, Reception: Michael Bom Annealed Solovyov, Even Putin’s Opponents Laughed.”) Bom failed to present any proof and was laughed at by the entire audience. Now, it is important to remember that Bom is more than just an expert, he represents the US, and Solovyev’s condescending attitude towards him reflects the country’s stand. Despite being

regularly shut down and physically attacked, Bom continues attending the show as, allegedly, he believes that this way he brings Russia closer to democracy, which many perceive as a mockery (Rothrock, “Russian TV's Favorite Chumps.”) According to Adamova, a few years ago one his appearance cost between 10000 and 15000 rubles (149\$- 225\$), but that might have changed due to the show’s tight budget (Адамова, “Confession of the Propagandist. Part II. How Are Political Talk Shows Made on the State TV.”) Among all of the regular oppositional guests, Bom is the only one who is obliged to attend a certain number of programs by contract, therefore, his earnings end up close to Kovtun’s, estimated at approximately 8000\$-9000\$ per month (Голованов, “Anti-Russian Experts on the TV Shows Are Ready to Bear Beatings For A Good Fee.”)

The third usual guest is the Polish political scientist Jakub Korejba, better known as “the most famous TV Russophobe” and a “neo-Nazi” (Rothrock, “Russian TV's Favorite Chumps.”) His main function is “to condemn Russia, Russian people and culture for all the world’s wrongs,” thus presumably reflecting the general European point of view (Rothrock, “Russian TV's Favorite Chumps.”) *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* has a long history of setting Russian values, which are often based in religion, and placing the guests accordingly. According to the show’s rhetoric, Europe, or, to be more specific, the European Union (the distinction which is usually implied but not verbalized on the show) is losing its European values, becoming a puppet of the US and is diving into becoming the “Gayropa.” Korejba, arguably, has the toughest time on *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*, as he constantly has to stay alert with glasses flying toward his head and heavily-opinionated guests, who wish to physically prove their point (“After Salary with a Suitcase: Polish Expert Korejba about His Work in Russia.”) According to the political scientist Eugene Super, who is also a regular guest on the *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*, “the viewers are more likely to understand the inferiority of the Polish current affairs if they see the embodiment of that in

someone like Korejba” (Голованов, “Anti-Russian Experts on the TV Shows Are Ready to Bear Beatings For A Good Fee.”) In the past, Korejba acted as a professor of the International Relations at the Moscow State Institute of the International Relations, but was removed in 2016 due to one of his anti-Russian expressions at the Evening with Vladimir Solovyov (“Jakub Korejba.”) Despite that, Korejba is still a welcome guest at the show, as he fulfills his function by distorting liberal values, thus reinforcing Russian political structure and Putin’s presidency. As such, during one of the episodes in April 2019, Korejba told Solovyev: “I’m saying this from the position of the West, of NATO, the European Union: since 2014, you [Russia] became foreign to us, different than us. You are not invited to the gentlemen club.” (“Get Out of Here: Solovyov Kicked the Polish Political Scientist Out of The Studio.”) Such rhetoric aggressively juxtaposes Russia to its main “enemies,” makes it seem like they are the ones who excluded Russia from the “club.” Thus, it suggests to the viewers that the democratic West purposefully shuts Russia out. Korejba is also the “cheapest” expert, as due to his irregular stay in Russia, he can only attend a limited number of programs, therefore he is the only one earning up to 7000\$ per month (Голованов, “Anti-Russian Experts on the TV Shows Are Ready to Bear Beatings For A Good Fee.”)

6.3.1.3. The Audience

While the home-audience of the political talk-shows is usually a passive receiver of the news, those actually present in the studio significantly contribute to the show’s success. A reporter from Komsolmolskaya Pravda participated as an audience member for the show *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* to find out more about the process. There are no specific requirements set for the participants, but the general rule suggests the age between 25-55 and a “respectable look,” usually meaning a suit for men (Чесноков “Secrets of Political TV Shows: Applauses - On Command, Villains – On A Salary, and Fights - Strictly Once Per Quarter.”) Participation is always paid: after submitting a short application with a

photo and being selected, each member is offered a 100 rubles rate per hour (2\$) (ЧЕШОКОВ “Secrets of Political TV Shows: Applauses - On Command, Villains – On A Salary, and Fights - Strictly Once Per Quarter.”) Generally, shooting one episode lasts 4 hours, so the average salary for the audience member is 400 rubles (6.24\$). The panel mostly consists of women over 50, who regularly attend the show (ЧЕШОКОВ “Secrets of Political TV Shows: Applauses - On Command, Villains – On A Salary, and Fights - Strictly Once Per Quarter.”) One of the audience members commented on why she keeps coming back: “here I feel like I am the center of the world – so many famous people. But it’s also a good side-job” (ЧЕШОКОВ “Secrets of Political TV Shows: Applauses - On Command, Villains – On A Salary, and Fights - Strictly Once Per Quarter.”)

There are certain rules for the audience members, including sustaining a neutral facial expression. According to Elena, who is responsible for instructing the audience panel before the beginning of the show, their main function is to “sit and clap when ordered” (ЧЕШОКОВ “Secrets of Political TV Shows: Applauses - On Command, Villains – On A Salary, and Fights - Strictly Once Per Quarter.”) The audience is not allowed to clap if no order was given, but, according to the reporter, there was also no specific logic associated with clapping: usually, they were ordered to clap each 20-30 seconds and after most monologues by Solovyev (ЧЕШОКОВ “Secrets of Political TV Shows: Applauses - On Command, Villains – On A Salary, and Fights - Strictly Once Per Quarter.”) The reporter also noticed that between the takes the main guest Korejba held a very peaceful conversation with the pro-Putin representatives, but when the filming continued, they started passionately screaming at each other (ЧЕШОКОВ “Secrets of Political TV Shows: Applauses - On Command, Villains – On A Salary, and Fights - Strictly Once Per Quarter.”)

The audience acts as active participants in a staged performance where followers of the “correct” beliefs are constantly fighting a war against the Americans, Poles

and Ukrainians represented by Bom, Kovtun and Korejba. They are the cheering crowd, the supporters of those who are bound to win the argument. And, as many guests have noticed, this 4-hour long performance is so exciting that it takes their mind off the real problems – both in their lives and in Russia (Чесноков “Secrets of Political TV Shows: Applauses - On Command, Villains – On A Salary, and Fights - Strictly Once Per Quarter.”) Soon, they get so involved in defeating the “paid enemies” that they lose interest in battling the real hardships. Thus, following the Semiotic Hyperreality Theory, *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* becomes a parody of real life – a scenario, where evil always loses, and those who support the Kremlin, United Russia and Vladimir Putin – always win. The viewers are left to decide which side they are on, but it is ensured that they know which side is the right one.

6.3.2. Structure of the Show *Vdud*

6.3.2.1. Topics

Unlike *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*, *Vdud* has a less regular airing schedule due to the episodes being tied not so much to a topic, but to a guest. Some of the irregular themes on the channel included documentaries on the Russian HIV epidemic, horrors of the Siberian prisons in Kolyma and the tragic terrorist attack in Beslan. Generally, an episode comes out every week featuring a politician, celebrity or a journalist. Documentaries, on the other hand, come out every 3-5 months. Despite such a broad scope of guests and the genre of interview, which is supposed to “show the opinion of the respondents, but not the journalist themselves,” Dud always manages to keep the discussion within his rhetoric and always ties the topic back to politics (Natsvlshvili, 385.) Some of the questions, which guests are always asked, include “if you were in front of Putin, what would you say to him?” and a variation of questions, associated with the president, such as “why does the Russian show business agitate for Putin?” and “is Putin a great guy?.” When asked why Dud always brings up Putin in his conversations, he answered: “because Putin is the most interesting Russian

phenomenon. Russian rap and Putin” (“Sobchak – on Navalny, Godfather and Elections / Vdud,” 53:00.)

Topics for the show *Vdud* are generally centered around something relevant to the audience whether it is a scandal, political reform, elections or a political movement, and, of course, around the guest. For example, in the interview with the Russian-American journalist Vladimir Pozner, the topic of the interview was Russian propaganda with the aim to expose the hypocritical nature of Russian journalism (“Pozner – on Censorship, Fear and Putin / Vdud.”) Similarly, during the interview with the second main Russian propagandist Dmitriy Kiselev, the topics were centered around his wealth, aiming at finding out how much Kiselev benefits from supporting the regime (“Kiselev – Brother in the US, Nephew at War, Pension / Vdud.”) This way, whenever Dud interviews a guest who does not reflect his beliefs, he focuses on topics, which would be perceived as negative or weak by his audience. Due to the lack of explicit political censorship on Youtube, Dud can ask provocative questions, including those about Putin, United Russia and TV propaganda, thus attracting an audience that cannot find those answers on Russian television.

Dud’s interviews are so successful in capturing the audience’s attention because they yet again deviate from the standards of the interview as a genre. Generally, “an interview excludes discussion,” but Dud always voices his opinion on the interviewee’s position and invites him to discuss the given statements together (Natsvlshvili, 385.) It allows Dud to maintain the desired course of the interview and provoke the guest to defend his position. Furthermore, it allows Dud to continue the anti-Putin rhetoric by asking questions, which put the person in a losing position in advance. As such, during the interview with Vladimir Pozner in 2017, Dud asked whether the journalist thinks that the price which Putin paid for “making the rest of the world regard Russia” is justified (“Pozner – on Censorship, Fear and Putin / Vdud,” 52:26.) Dud elaborated: “Putin created a regime, which

excludes the freedom of press, independence of the judiciary and destroyed the political system. After Putin, the only thing left is the scorched earth. Is that great?” (“Pozner – on Censorship, Fear and Putin / Vdud,” 53:00.) Pozner tried to deny that Russian political system is distorted, so Dud asked whether he can answer the question of “who if not Putin?” (“Pozner – on Censorship, Fear and Putin / Vdud,” 53:10.) Pozner said that he cannot come up with anyone to which Dud replied: “me neither. It is a great justification that political life revolves around one person. I doubt that it can be good for the country” (“Pozner – on Censorship, Fear and Putin / Vdud,” 53:30.) To that, Pozner agreed: “It is not good, but I live in a country where I have to play by the rules. If I want to do something with my career, no one else can approve it without his word” (“Pozner – on Censorship, Fear and Putin / Vdud,” 53:31.) The interview continued with Dud making a clear distinction between his show and Russian television: “Vladimir, we are not on Russia-1. I might be wrong, but the blame for the lack of real oppositional candidates is on the person who has been destroying his political competitors” (“Pozner – on Censorship, Fear and Putin / Vdud,” 53:58.) Interestingly enough, the interview, as was noted, started off as an episode on the propaganda in Russian media, but inevitably took the course of discussing the presidency of Putin. At the end of the interview, Dud asked Pozner to express three main criticisms of Putin, which pre-sets the negative tone of the answer (“Pozner – on Censorship, Fear and Putin / Vdud,” 55:10.) That is an example of how Dud includes himself in the interview and provokes the guest to fall into his own rhetoric, which maintains a negative image of Vladimir Putin.

When it comes to Dud’s documentaries, he is much freer in terms of the rhetoric he wants to present and the choice of topics, as he personally narrates the story and only interviews those, who present an alternative Russian view similar to his own. In the documentary “Kolyma: Birthplace of Our Fear,” Dud condemned Stalinist repressions and those who are seeking to change Russian history by excusing Stalin’s actions. The movie

came out around the same time when the Levada Centre released its latest survey results, which showed that 70% of the respondents – the highest ever registered number since the break-down of the USSR - believe that Stalin was a positive figure (“Levada Center: 70% of Russians Positively Assess Stalin's Role in the Country’s Life.”) Dud tied the documentary back to the current political situation with: “Kolyma is not about the past – it is about the present. Fear is the biggest enemy of freedom. Being afraid of your own opinion means not taking risks, not improving yourself or your country. Don’t be afraid” (“Kolyma - Birthplace of Our Fear,” 2:16:00.) The documentary did not specifically address Putin or draw parallels between the paralyzing fear of living under Stalin and living under Putin, but the implication was clear. After its release, the movie received a lot of praise from the Youtube audience and a lot of hatred from the press, including from the Russian TV journalist Arkadij Babchenko, who commented: “what can a hipster-looking millionaire teach about GULAGs?” (“About Dud’s Film ‘Kolyma’ and Its Critics.”) Similarly, the movie on the terrorist attack in Beslan came out after the government had almost fully ignored the anniversary of the tragedy (Тараканов, “Professional of the Year – the Journalist Jury Dud.”) Dud talked about how the government betrayed its citizens in Beslan because “Russia does not negotiate with terrorists,” and now, 15 years later, it continues doing the same by silencing the topic (Тараканов, “Professional of the Year – the Journalist Jury Dud.”) Solovyev commented on the movie, which quickly became the most popular documentary ever done on Beslan: “Dud happily says that it’s all the government’s fault. But you have to be a complete degenerate [to believe that]” (“Worthless Scum: Why did Solovyev attack Dud?”) Most importantly, such backlash or “flak” from the government-dependent news outlets and representatives shows that *Vdud*’s rhetoric is inconvenient for the Kremlin. Therefore, *Vdud* as a phenomenon can be considered a form of “flak” in itself, as it constantly mocks, attacks and calls the Russian

media out. *Vdud*'s topics are not only inconvenient but often directly challenging to the Kremlin's position, thus creating a negative image of the president.

6.3.2.2. Guests

Guests on the show *Vdud* vary from oppositional politicians to musicians and journalists. It is important to note that Dud sees all of those "relevant" representatives as parts of a bigger political structure where everyone plays a certain role, thus often asking them political questions even if they seemingly have little to do with politics. Some of the political figures who attended Dud's show included Aleksey Navalny, Ksenija Sobchak, Dmitry Kiselev and Andrej Kolesnikov. While Dud invites people of both ends of the political spectrum (pro-Putin and anti-Putin), he makes it clear whether he supports the guest or not. As such, during his interview with Kolesnikov, who is a Russian journalist and a member of the so-called "Kremlin's pool," also known as Putin's chronicler, Dud laughed at the statement: "Putin respects the rules of the game. He will step down after 2024" ("Andrej Kolesnikov – Putin's chronicler / *Vdud*," 34:00.) Even in such a non-verbal way of reacting to the guest, Dud managed to convey his own position on the topic. At the end of the interview, Dud asked about Kolesnikov's opinion on Solovyev, to which Kolesnikov replied: "Such propagandistic journalism is not something I like" ("Andrej Kolesnikov – Putin's chronicler / *Vdud*," 1:07.) Dud immediately replied: "How are your answers in this interview not propaganda?.. You have served as Putin's advocate for 90% of the questions. You shake peoples' hands in the Kremlin with watches on them which cost 10000-15000 euros and don't care that people in Ural don't live like you and I do in Moscow" ("Andrej Kolesnikov – Putin's chronicler / *Vdud*," 1:08.) Such accusatory tone is common for *Vdud*'s interviews, especially when the rhetoric starts shifting toward praising Vladimir Putin. "You shouldn't be the slave of your own cliché," Kolesnikov noted ("Andrej Kolesnikov – Putin's chronicler / *Vdud*," 1:11.). Therefore, Dud's journalistic practises are sometimes put into question, as,

generally, the interview should “show the opinion of the respondent, but not of the journalists themselves” (Natsvlishvili, 385.) However, it is important to go back to the fact that Russian journalists do not perceive themselves as independent watchdogs of the ruling party, but rather “as political players” (Oates, 1287.) For the majority of journalists, being a member of small independent groups, such as *Novaya Gazeta*, is simply not financially sustainable. According to Roman Badanin, who used to be the editor-in-chief of TV Rain, “censorship and various pressures make it next to impossible to create, in Russia, an independent outlet that would be serious about investigations and would make money through advertising.” (Rostova, “Saving Their Profession: Russian Journalists and Their New Media.”) Journalists are well aware that their success would directly correspond with the position they adopt, forcing them to choose their battles wisely. For Dud, who operates through donations and advertisements’ money, it is important to disclose his opinion on the president since he is one of the few journalists who can afford to do so. Whether in modern Russia such journalistic role is more important than the observatory one is subject to a different discussion.

While Solovyev gets specific directions regarding those he can invite on the show, Dud is free to decide for himself as the show fully belongs to him and operates on a government-independent platform. By inviting both pro-Putin and anti-Putin guests, Dud upholds the journalistic standards of being a “watch-dog of the people” while simultaneously deciding how to interview the guest – whether to go lighter on him or make him uncomfortable. Therefore, *Vdud* creates a negative image of Vladimir Putin almost exclusively through its host, Jury Dud, who remains in charge of the course of the interview, editing and narrating, thus eventually deciding how a guest will be perceived. While *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* is more dramaturgical and has a complex structure of public whipping, Dud’s tactic is more subtle. However, it is as effective mostly because *Vdud*’s viewers do not have many alternatives – *Vdud* remains one of the only political shows, where

they can see many top Russian political figures being questioned and sometimes even ridiculed. When it comes to Putin's supporters, the interview often turns into an interrogation, where the guest is asked tough questions about their political agenda. Sometimes, as in case with Kolesnikov, guests become defensive and try to rebuff the argument by protecting the regime: "Putin is not a person who is manically obsessed with power...the elections are competitive" ("Andrej Kolesnikov – Putin's chronicler / Vdud," 1:06.) In other scenarios, like with Dmitry Kiselev, they turn the conversation around by trying to present Dud as an unprepared journalist who does not understand the complexity of the situation: "You have untrustworthy sources of information...you are changing the concepts" ("Kiselev – Brother in the US, Nephew at War, Pension / Vdud," 1:30:31). Either way, Dud effectively challenges his guests to *defend* their pro-Putin position or *explain* their anti-Putin one – a distinction, which clearly reflects the host's own views and plays into the show's political agenda.

6.3.2.3. The Audience

The audience of the political talk shows is supposed to express their opinion on the events happening in the show – on *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* it happens in the form of clapping since the audience is physically present, but on *Vdud* it happens in the form of online comments, views and likes. This way, the audience communicates with the host and with each other – suggests, how the rest of the viewers should react to the episode and whether it is worth their time. The audience's interest can be generally tracked by analysing the videos, which received the highest number of views. Some of the top *Vdud*'s releases currently include the movie on Kolyma (19 million views), the movie on Beslan (19 million views) and the interview with the oppositional politician Aleksey Navalny (16 million views).

Dud's target audience is mainly made up of people between the ages of 18-30. Those people have lived under Putin's presidency for their entire life, but, simultaneously, they are the hope that future might be different. For that reason, Dud's documentaries and interviews are aimed at them. For example, according to the results published by the Levada Centre back in 2017, right before the release of "Kolyma: Birthplace of Our Fear," 47% of the respondents between the ages of 18-24 reported that they have never heard of the Stalinist repressions before (Дергачев, "Stalin's Approval Level by Russians Broke The Historic Record.") Dud was aiming to change that: "the purpose of this video is to show the horrors which our country went through" (Kolyma). And, happily for Dud, his audience is greatly receptive.

Dud's audience is generally open-minded, and top comments always support the show's official rhetoric. As such, some of the top comments on the interview with Kiselev were: "the only video which received so many dislikes. What a horrible creature," "a horrible man who is afraid of saying something wrong," "try living on your pension" ("Kiselev – Brother in the US, Nephew at War, Pension / Vdud.") Now, just like in case with *Evening with Vladimir Solovyov's* audience, it is hard to convincingly state whether the top comments are indicators of anything, at all. While Solovyev's audience is paid, *Vdud's* comments might be ordered or written by bots, but out of 141000 comments most on the first few pages are supportive of Dud and negative of Kiselev ("Kiselev – Brother in the US, Nephew at War, Pension / Vdud.") A similar tendency is seen in other interviews, depending on the host's position toward the guest – the viewers were more likely to praise Aleksey Navalny and judge the possibly Kremlin-orchestrated oppositional candidate Ksenija Sobchak. After watching their interviews, it becomes visible that Dud holds the same position. Since this thesis does not argue that political talk shows form political views of the audience but rather support them, it becomes visible that Dud's audience generally holds anti-

Kremlin views. Therefore, it is much easier for the show *Vdud* to heat up the already existing atmosphere and promote the rhetoric, which is already shared by his audience.

Chapter 7. Method 3: Images of the Hosts

7.1. Theoretical Framework for the Investigation

7.1.1. The Imitation Theory

The Imitation theory was first presented by the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde and was then re-formulated by the American psychologist Mark Baldwin (Ellwood, 721.) Since both scholars approached the topic from two different points of views – one from the psychological learning of a child and another from the study of social behavior, their understanding of the Imitation Theory differed (Ellwood, 722.) For the purposes of this analysis, Tarde’s formulation was chosen, as it enhances the understanding of the way the Imitation theory conditions the society. According to Tarde, “society is imitation...imitation is the elementary social phenomenon” (Ellwood, 722.) Tarde suggests that all societal functions can be explained by members imitating each other in an unconscious act, which, once realized, can be effectively used to control the society (Ellwood, 722.) Going further, Tarde says that every action – starting with brushing the teeth and ending with one’s political affiliations – is an act of imitation: “there is not a word that you say which is not the reproduction” (Ellwood, 723.) Therefore, Tarde puts the societal functions into three simple categories: “imitation, conflict and invention, where conflict and invention are just the logical results of the imitation” (Ellwood, 723.) Imitation is essential for social development and evolvement, thus being an important factor of social behavior. The process goes as follows: “the individual develops intellectually by imitating the mental attitudes and actions of others, while society changes through the continued imitation of the thought of some individual” (Ellwood, 724.) Thus, it all comes down to the person who is imitated, whose ideas and behavior are deemed as morally and intellectually advanced, forcing others to adopt a similar model. Logically, it follows that individuals strive to imitate each other and find “leaders” to

follow, which can be used in several ways in this chapter. First of all, the Imitation Theory can explain why Vladimir Solovyev attempts to imitate life of average workers in Russia, and ways in which such behavior makes him more appealing to his audience. Secondly, it can explain why Dud does quite the opposite and acts extremely transparent about his wealth, thus sending the message that if his audience shares his beliefs, they will get to share his lifestyle, as well, hence urging them to imitate him.

7.2. Literature Review of the Relevant Scholars

This chapter will focus on ways in which images created of the hosts help the shows promote their respective rhetoric. In *the Ultimate Weapon. Fundamentals of Psychological Warfare and Media Manipulation*, the political scientist Valerij Solovey explains the role of the hosts in political talk shows. According to Solovey, “the main purpose of any host is to influence the audience” (Соловей, ch. *How to Win Any Discussion*.) Such influence is exclusively psychological, and Solovey goes into depths exploring verbal and non-verbal tricks, which hosts use to turn the conversation in a certain direction. One of them particularly stands out: according to Solovey, the audience is more likely to engage with the host if they feel like they can identify with him (Соловей, ch. *How to Win Any Discussion*.) According to him, when watching political talk shows, viewers do not intend to receive information as much as they intend to empathize with the host, and it is easier to empathize with someone who is familiar to them (Соловей, ch. *How to Win Any Discussion*.) This can again explain certain patterns of Solovyev’s behavior, which will be discussed later – for example, his desire to cover up his wealth, even though most of it was legally obtained. Similarly, it can explain why Dud constantly appeals to his audience when addressing Russian politics and uses “we” to highlight his belonging to the same group as his viewers. Solovey suggests that the audience lives a little life when watching a talk show, and the extent to which they will engage with it fully depends on their level of trust in the host

(Соловей, ch. *How to Win Any Discussion*.) Solovey analyses other factors, which will not be significant for this chapter, such as psychological techniques used by the hosts to convey a certain point of view and non-verbal ways of communication, including gestures and posture. Here, we will exclusively focus on why Solovyev and Dud form a certain image and how their image appeals to their target audience.

7.3. Analysis of the Image of Vladimir Solovyev

Since *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* and *Vdud* are meant to represent political beliefs worth sharing, their hosts have to broadcast an appealing image. This way, the audience is more likely to engage with their content and draw parallels between their political affiliations and their image.

Russian journalist Elena Afanasjeva rightly noted that *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* “is a show where guests and topics are not as important as its host Vladimir Solovyev” (Афанасьева, “Pavlovshina Live”) Solovyev’s figure is well-known, and he conforms to the expectations of a typical pro-Putin guy in a number of ways. Before proceeding to specific examples, it is important to note that there is a clear distinction between the created images of the hosts and their actual personality – this research assumes that both Solovyev and Dud publicly act in a certain way, which does not necessarily reflect their personal beliefs, but the values of their shows.

Solovyev’s image is one of an emotional, intelligent and slightly rude common man from a working-class background. He does not abstain from employing harsh language and often uses statistics (sometimes, false ones) to back his arguments. Therefore, while still keeping the peoples’ man image, he appears to be smarter than them, thus authorised to guide them through the political hardships of Russia. In reality, Solovyev’s image is meticulously calculated and set to reflect the Kremlin’s socialist agenda.

7.3.1 The Common Guy

Solovyev comes from a working-class family, but he quickly made a television career in Russia after working as a professor of economics at the University of Alabama in the United States for a couple of years (“Vladimir Solovyev – Biography.”) Until 2017, Solovyev never exposed his official earnings and often mentioned his previous jobs, which included a janitor, builder and a tailor, creating an image of a typical proletariat, which many Russians can identify with. His official salary on the channel Russia-1 is confidential, but some sources state it as a modest 25000\$ per month, which is a very average wage for one of the most popular channel’s host (“How Much Does Vladimir Solovyev Make?”) In comparison, the host of a popular show *Live* on Russia-1, Andrej Malakhov, recently admitted that his monthly salary averages around 50000\$, doubling Solovyev’s earnings (Sobchak). This creates an idea of Solovyev as of a simple man who is willing to publicly fight for his political beliefs for a comparatively small reward, and there is a reason for that. The Russian society has a long history of hating the “wealthy,” most vividly illustrated during the execution of the prosperous peasants (Kulaks) known as the Great Purge “of the late 1930s, with 669,929 people arrested and 376,202 executed” (Figes, 240.) However, the almost genetical hatred towards the rich did not end with the break-down of the Soviet Union. In the interview with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the Russian writer Yevgeny Rein explains the ongoing loathing: “the initial reason for the negative attitude towards the wealthy people lies in Orthodoxy, which is concerned with the salvation of the soul, and not earthly goods” (“Why Do Russians Dislike the Rich?”) As of 2019, 71% of Russians identify as Orthodox Christians with 53% saying that being Orthodox is essential for being a true Russian (Masci, “Split between Ukrainian, Russian Churches Shows Political Importance of Orthodox Christianity.”) Another reason for the hatred, according to Rein, originated due to the egoism of the New Russians, a newly-rich economic class which was formed in 1990s

and did not contribute to the economic prosperity of the country (“Why Do Russians Dislike the Rich?”) In addition to the broader, general causes for such attitudes, there is a simpler reason for the indignation. According to the report published in January 2019 by the independent Russian news aggregator Meduza, “about 65 percent of Russia’s net wealth belongs to the top 10-percent earners while the poorest half of the population owns less than five percent of the country’s net wealth” (“The Top 1% Controls a Third of the Wealth, and the Poor Are Getting Poorer. How Russia Became One of the Most Unequal Places on Earth.”) It seems obvious that Russians blame the rich for the existing inequality rather than the system itself. Thus, the reversed Imitation Theory is applicable to Vladimir Solovyev, as he imitates the working-class people (his show’s target audience) in order to appear more familiar to them. The working-class remains the show’s most desired audience, as they make up for the biggest chunk of the population since the middle-class barely exists in Russia (7%) and the wealthy make up for 10% (“Research: Middle Class Makes Up For 7% of the Russian Population.”) Therefore, the “common guy” image is the most effective one for the show’s pro-Kremlin agenda, even though Solovyev’s real wealth easily puts him in the previously mentioned 10%. In 2017, an investigation looking into Solovyev’s property was carried out by The Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), which is a Russian non-profit organization established by Aleksei Navalny (“The Anti-Corruption Fond.”) The findings included two villas in Italy, three flats in Moscow, a cottage and a Maybach, equating to 15,5 million dollars in total (“You Are Going to Laugh. We Found Another Villa of His in Italy. And a Maybach.”) Following the investigation, a few unauthorised sources reported that Solovyev’s monthly net salary reaches 67 million rubles, which equates to one million dollars (“The Host Solovyev Commented on the Gossips About His Salary.”) The source (allegedly, a Ukrainian blogger), also hinted that Solovyev does not pay taxes due to his close alliance with the president – unverified, but not unimaginative information (“The Host Solovyev

Commented on the Gossips About His Salary.”) Solovyev responded in one of his show’s episodes by calling the information “ridiculous” and pointing out the nationality of the blogger (“The Host Solovyev Commented on the Gossips About His Salary.”) Since the story has been unravelling in the last couple of years, it is yet unclear whether Solovyev will choose to maintain the position of the common guy. Since his audience consists primarily of the older generation, which does not generally turn to Youtube and online outlets, it is likely that this information will never reach them. Still, in the interview with *The Insider* Solovyev responded that he is free to buy whatever he wants as long as he pays taxes, which does not contradict his image of the honest host (Архипов, “Vladimir Solovyev About Italy: Earn a Lot, If I Want – I Will Buy More. What? Where Did I Say That Europe Is Bad?”)

7.3.1 The Religious Member of “Intellegentcia”

Solovyev constantly presents himself as the “believer,” supporter of the traditional values yet a seemingly progressive and intelligent man, which falls in line with the general beliefs of his target audience.

In an interview, Solovyev opposed Russia to the West by suggesting that all liberal movements, including feminism, are created against God (Шафран, “Feminism and Other “Isms” Reject God.”) For Solovyev, the true Christianity is in loving the one’s homeland while rejecting the fundamental religious staples means hating such homeland (Шафран, “Feminism and Other “Isms” Reject God.”) Such point of view is not only populist, but also exceptionally convenient for Putin’s Russia. As was already touched upon, 71% of Russians identify as Orthodox Christians, thus a host who shares those values is bound to seem more appealing and, possibly, prematurely correct in his judgements (Masci, David. “Split between Ukrainian, Russian Churches Shows Political Importance of Orthodox Christianity.”) Secondly, religion – the country’s soft power - has long been used as a justification for Russian authoritarian regime and currently, Putin is considering adding faith

in God to Constitution (“Russia's Putin Wants Traditional Marriage and God in Constitution.”) Seemingly, Putin believes that “Russia is neither Western nor Asian, but rather a unique society representing a unique set of values which are believed to be divinely inspired” (Antunez, “The Role of Religion and Values in Russian Policies: The Case of Hybrid Warfare.”) This automatically excludes Russia from the necessity of following the political rules since Russia is presented as a “unique” society. Putin’s relationship with the Church is symbiotic: he sponsors them and they worship him (“The Geopolitics of Faith: Religious Soft Power in Russian and U.S. Foreign Policy.”) Some of the examples of how Russian Church supported Putin’s reign included Patriarch Kirill proclaiming Putin’s presidency to be “a miracle of god” (“Russian Orthodox Patriarch Calls Putin's Reign a 'Miracle of God',”) and intervention in Crimea being presented as “a holy mission” (“Russia's Putin Wants Traditional Marriage and God in Constitution.”) Therefore, Solovyev’s religious affiliations are directly supportive of Putin’s regime. However, it is not enough to share the same beliefs with his audience – in order to be listened to and “imitated,” he must be perceived as their knowledgeable leader (Ellwood, 723.) For this reason, Solovyev is being presented as a pure representative of the “Intelligentsia” – a class of educated and spiritually enlightened Russians (“The Essence and Specifics of the Russian Intelligentsia.”) Solovyev constantly refers to historic events, debunks arguments using memorized statistics and can recite passages from books on the spot, which he does not hesitate to demonstrate on his show. This creates an image of a true Russian patriot, who knows very well what he is talking about and, simultaneously, falls in line with the general pro-Putin rhetoric.

7.4. Analysis of the Image of Jury Dud

Jury Dud is Solovyev’s pure antagonist: young and seemingly frivolous, covered in tattoos and wearing metal chains, he radiates a very different image. Dud’s conversational manner of hosting interviews and alacrity to advertise anything from banks to

headphone sets, quickly became a part of his creative persona. He became well-known as a wealthy, witty and courageous journalistic soldier on the front-lines of Russian political life. Dud's image is quite the opposite of Solovyev's: he projects that it is possible to be successful and brave while opposing the Kremlin.

7.4.1 The Rich Man

Similarly to Solovyev, Dud conforms to the traditional Theory of Imitation by acting as a "leader," as an example of a person who young people want to be like. In the era when blogging became a desirable hobby, he shows that while making money, you can also share unpopular opinions and present different points of view. In all of his episodes, Dud asks the guests about their salaries while being relatively open about his own. Russian Blogger's Research Agency (RIAB) analysed revenues of the most viewed Russian bloggers for the second half of 2017 based on the price for their advertisings ("How Much Do Jury Dud, Wylsacom, Nikolaj Sobolev and Other Popular Bloggers Make.") According to their research, Dud's earnings estimated around 17,6 million rubles for that period, making it 2,9 million rubles per month equating to, approximately, 45000\$ per month.

The significance of these results goes beyond simply showing that wealth and Kremlin-dependency do not necessarily go hand in hand. Dud positions himself as a promise that life on the liberal side of the equation can be better – can be richer, can be freer. According to research published by The Moscow Times, "a total of 48 percent of urban Russians said they will never live to see a decent salary" ("Half of Russians Say They'll Never Live to See a Decent Salary – Survey.") Such salary was cited at 1000\$, while an average Russian earns 43,030 rubles, approximately 537.88\$ ("Half of Russians Say They'll Never Live to See a Decent Salary – Survey.") For comparison, monthly rent in Russia ranges between "11,750 rubles (\$186) for 1-room (studio) apartment, 15,423 rubles (\$245) for 1-bedroom and 21,670 rubles (\$344) for 2-bedroom apartments" (Stan, "Russian Rental

Market.”) As was already mentioned, middle-class makes for a very small percentage of the Russian population, leaving most people at the level of the working-class. Many Russians directly link low standard of living with Putin’s presidency (Seddon, “Vladimir Putin Admits to Russians' Anger over Faltering Economy.”) Currently, the percentage of Russians who do not want Putin to be president after 2024 (38%) has increased by 11% since last year (Шимов, “A Very Tired Society: Russians Describe Themselves and the World in Putin’s Era.”) Therefore, Dud’s wealth would seem reasonable to them: of course, life must be better for those who successfully escape the oppressive system.

According to the Levada Center’s poll, “75% of Russians wish for a better relationship with the West,” which the sociologist Denis Volkov explains as: “they want the Western standard of living” (Welle, “Russians Want to Live like in Europe, But Not Follow Its Norms.”) While many Russians still oppose some liberal values of the US and the EU, they might find it easier to digest such information through Dud, who carefully pushes the conversation in the anti-Putin direction while not promoting the movements (LGBTQ rights, for example), which Russians are still not ready for. In April 2019, Russia saw the highest number of those supporting equal rights for gays (47%), but 53% are still standing against that (“Almost Half of Russians Are For the Equal LGBT Rights. But the Majority Does Not Like Gays.”) It is important to note that anti-liberal attitudes have been manufactured in Russian society for decades with the enforcement of strict, oppressive laws. In such environment, Dud acts as a very successful embodiment of the anti-Kremlin rhetoric: a man, who was not only brave enough to express what many are thinking, but earned money while doing it.

7.4.2 The Brave Soldier

The Russian media environment can be described as hostile and oppressive, according to the scholar David Wedgwood Benn: “at present, Russian journalists face

enormous difficulties” (Benn, 477.) Since the 2000s, at least 28 Russian journalists were murdered, the largest number of which worked for the journal *Novaya Gazeta*, which provides critical overview of the Russian political and economic spheres (“CPJ’s Database of Attacks on the Press.”) The grip gets even tighter around television news as “two thirds of Russians turn to state-run television for news, so Putin can use state media to rally popular support for his political agenda” (Campbell, 4.) While general media censorship and strict regulations have been referenced a few times earlier, it is important to add that free speech online is also suffering from the new rules. One example is Putin’s “kill switch,” which gives him the power “to shut down Internet in Russia during government-defined disasters, including large-scale civil protests” (Campbell, 1.) In the media environment, where anti-Kremlin journalists face severe consequences for their agendas, Dud is perceived by many as a courageous man on the political frontlines. He is young, audacious and inspiring – and as long as he continues being “the voice of the marginalized,” people will continue following him. Solovyev’s image is oriented at creating an individual, whom people might like and identify with while Dud receives the same amount of support simply through his political position. Politics forms both journalist’s images, but Solovyev adjusts his persona to make his agenda more appealing while Dud’s agenda makes him more appealing by itself. Such paradox can be easily explained: first of all, people tend to seek information which fits their views (Hsu, “People Choose News That Fits Their Views.”) Secondly, Dud does not face any real competition – by not giving him any air-time, the government conforms to the audience’s opinion that only credible journalists, who have something valid to say, will be silenced. Since Dud represents a popular but less *popularized* opinion, he faces less backlash. Quite to the contrary, his show acts as a form of flak itself, as was already shown in the previous chapter. Solovyev, on the other hand, is under more pressure to defend himself: Putin’s approval ratings are steadily declining, being at only 35% as of January 2020 (“Russians’

Trust in Putin Halves in 2 Years – Poll.”) This is another factor which makes Dud’s agenda, and, thus, Dud himself, more attractive to the audience while simultaneously forcing Solovyev to work harder to maintain his own image.

7.4.3 The Voice of the Marginalized

Dud’s documentaries on sensitive topics, where he interviews victims of a number of Russian tragedies, became one of the few platforms to provide a different a point of view on those horrific events. His coverage of Beslan presented a radically different rhetoric: it was excessively critical of the government’s actions, including the storming of the school and provoking the Chechens to attack. Similarly, his presentation of Kolyma⁴ drew parallels with the current administration. Finally, his most recent documentary on the HIV epidemic in Russia allowed him to interview the LGBTQ-representatives and those directly affected, who otherwise, would have not received any air-time on Russian television. For Russian citizens, Dud became the person to turn to in order to find information about the subjects that interest them but do not receive any television coverage. Furthermore, he became the person, who does not praise the government for their handling of the emergencies, but criticizes them. Currently, the Kremlin denies that victims of Beslan do not get even minor medical support following the repercussion of the terrorist attack – and that they mostly need it because of the government’s failed plan to release the hostages (The Kremlin Commented Data About the Abandoned Victims of the Beslan Terrorist Attack.”) Similarly, members of the State Duma continuously deny that the HIV epidemic exists in Russia (“Onishenko Judged the HIV Epidemic Situation in Russia.”) Dud’s documentaries disprove those statements – and for Russians, who have the lowest trust in their government

⁴ This refers to GULAGS established in the Russian district of Kolyma, which were actively used during Stalinist times.

in the entire world, it makes Dud seem like a credible journalist, who gives voice to those who lack it (“Russians Lead the World in Lack of Institutional Trust – Survey.”)

Furthermore, Dud uses personal pronouns (we) to appeal to his audience when presenting. For example, in the documentary *Beslan. Remember*, Dud ended the movie with: “Some time ago, the government made mistakes, which caused a tragedy. Is the government doing everything to be forgiven by us? Is the government doing everything to be trusted by us? Or is it only doing everything to never and nowhere bring this topic up?” (“Beslan. Remember.” 1:40.) Dud puts his audience on the same frontline as himself: this way, the viewers feel like he represents their beliefs without needing to disclose them themselves. Dud is what many Russian people want to be, say and think, but are too afraid of doing so. Thus, Dud uses the theory of Imitation in a similar yet slightly different way than Solovyev: while not trying to imitate his audience, Dud acts exclusively as their leader, thus encouraging the viewers to adopt his rhetoric.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

Despite having opposite views on Vladimir Putin, *Vdud* and *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* use the same strategies to construct the president's image, though adjusting them in their own way. They use platforms occupied by their target audience, construct supporting structures of the shows and adjust their own images to promote the adopted rhetoric. Therefore, the platform, structure and image of the host do indeed play a critical role in the creation of positive or negative image of Putin both on *Vdud* and *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev*.

Furthermore, it can be conclusively stated that television continues serving as the most popular source of political information for Russian citizens, but the Internet's influence is growing significantly. Based on this research, it can be predicted that in the next decade, Internet will outweigh the Russian state-TV, as generations change. In addition to that, it can be noted that Putin's administration significantly depends on the media coverage and possibly sees it as a necessary tool for consolidating power, which can be judged from Solovyev's extra episodes during the elections, as described in chapter 6.

The purpose of the investigation was to illustrate that both shows use similar strategies to promote their rhetoric, but it also found that, in fact, by doing so they inevitably face a certain level of bias: by using the platforms, structure and images of the hosts, they manipulate public opinion to adopt their rhetoric rather than objectively treating Putin's presidency as an exclusive, independent topic. Ultimately, both of the shows become *solely* about Putin and the hosts' choice of the platform, structure and their own image fully depends on their agenda in regards to him. It can be argued that such a conclusion is inevitable since the Russian political environment revolves around the same person, thus every topic discussed on the political shows will come back to him. Such paradox suggests that it is

almost impossible for Russian political talk shows to be completely objective, as they will be forced to take their stand on Putin's presidency and adjust their coverage accordingly.

While the Russian media case is unique, it offers a valuable lesson for other cultures. It shows how censorship and restrictions force even those, who strive for objectivity and truth to take sides. It shows why the Russian broadcast environment is so black and white, and how their political system only allows for the controlled opposition. Finally, it vividly demonstrates how the regime turns media grounds into a battle-field, where journalists do not have the option of staying out of politics even if they want to.

This research might be extended by analysing a wider range of Russian political talk shows and seeing whether these three main components are equally used in their strategic coverage of Vladimir Putin. But, perhaps, the most fundamental way of continuing this research would be by comparing techniques used on Russian political talk shows and, for example, on American ones for constructing public opinions of the president. This way, it would be possible to draw parallels between the democratic and non-democratic political systems, and see if the techniques adopted by their media are different, after all. If such investigation does not find significant differences, then it could be possible to evaluate whether broadcast media can be considered liberal and democratic in the United States or the European Union, or if it is as controlled, but in a different (possibly, less obvious) way.

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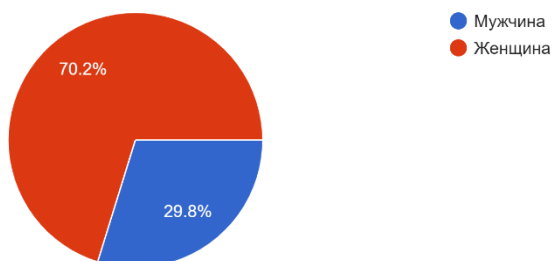
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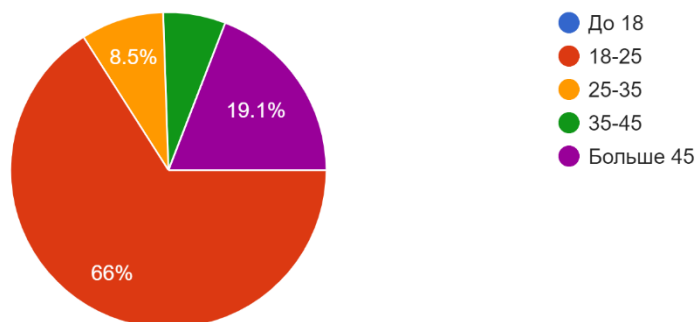
APPENDIX

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Question 1. State your gender



Question 2. How old are you?



Question 3. What do you think about political shows on Russian television?

Option 1: They truly reflect the current political situation in Russia

Option 2: They distort the facts for the sake of the state / those who benefit from it.

Option 3: They neutrally represent the facts.

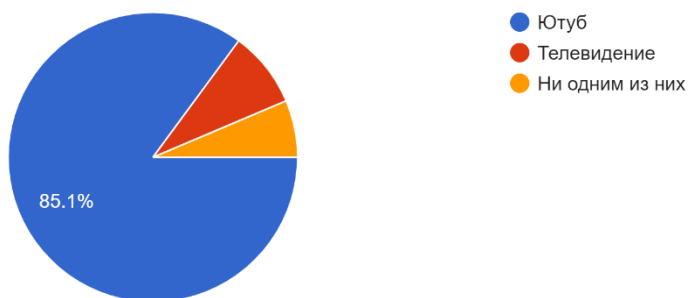


Question 4: Which media platform do you regularly use?

Option 1: Youtube

Option 2: Television

Option 3: Neither

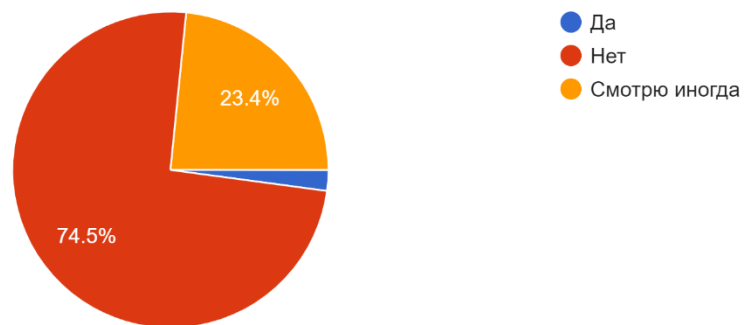


Question 5: Do you regularly watch Evening with Vladimir Solovyev?

Option 1: Yes

Option 2: No

Option 3: Occasionally



Question 6: If you have answered “yes” or “watch occasionally,” name the main reason

Option 1: His statements are close to me, and I share his beliefs.

Option 2: He established himself as a good and reliable journalist whom I trust.

Option 3: I like the structure of his show, it's interesting to watch the episodes.

Option 4: There is nothing else to watch.

Option 5: Other

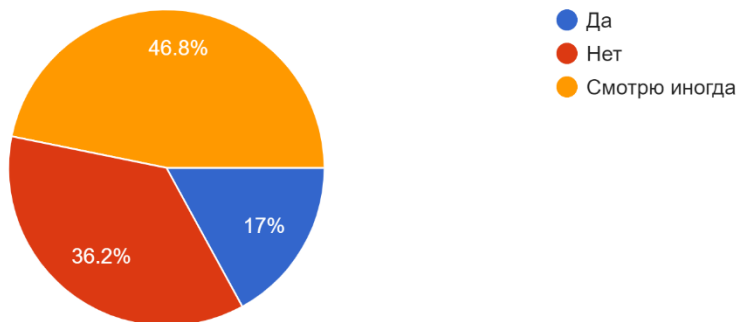


Question 7: Do you regularly watch Vdud?

Option 1: Yes

Option 2: No

Option 3: Occasionally



Question 8: If you have answered “yes” or “watch occasionally,” name the main reason:

Option 1: His statements are close to me, and I share his beliefs.

Option 2: He established himself as a good and reliable journalist whom I trust.

Option 3: I like the structure of his show, it's interesting to watch the episodes.

Option 4: There is nothing else to watch.

Option 5: Other



Question 9: If you answered “no” to both of the previous questions, specify the main reason:

Option 1: None of these shows reflect the political reality in Russia.

Option 2: I do not trust any of these shows

Option 3: None of these shows reflect my political views.

Option 4: None of these shows are of interest to me.

Option 5: I do not like any of the hosts.

Results: 0 responses.

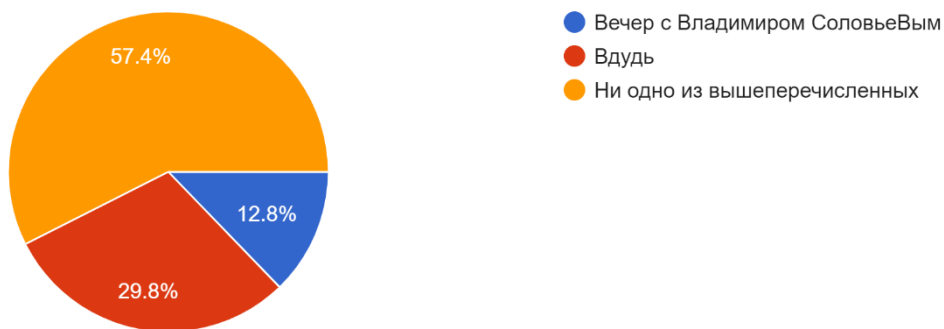
Question 10: In your opinion, which of the listed shows most faithfully reflects the political situation in Russia?

Option 1: Vdud

Option 2: Evening with Vladimir Solovyev

Option 3: Neither of them

Option 4: Both of them

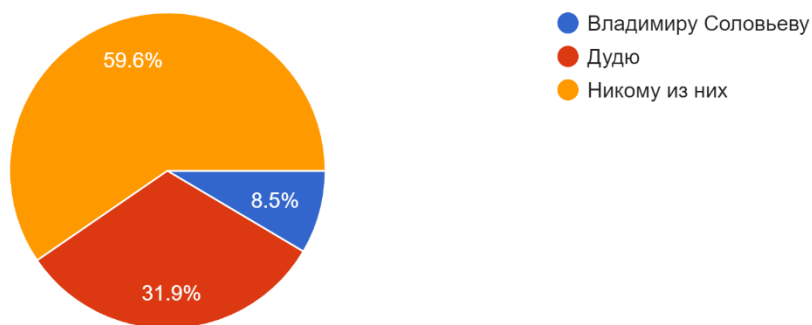


Question 11: Whose political statement do you trust the most?

Option 1: Dud

Option 2: Solovyev

Option 3: Neither of them



Question 12: In your opinion, which of the listed platforms gives the most opportunity for freedom of speech in Russia?

Option 1: Youtube

Option 2: Television

Option 3: Neither of the platforms allows for freedom of speech

Option 4: Both of the platforms allows for freedom of speech



