



Europe on Russian TV screens – latest trends

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Over the last few weeks many Europe related news programmes and political talk shows on Russian television have been dedicated to the post-mortem on the EU-Russia summit in Samara. Attempts were made to explore the causes of tensions between Russia and the European Union. Three themes have already been topical for several months: US plans for a new missile defence system in Europe, the Polish meat affair and the future status of Kosovo. Extensive coverage has also been given to President Putin's visits to Austria and Luxembourg. Another news-making story revolved around the investigation into the murder of Alexander Litvinenko, a former Russian secret agent, and the recent request from the British Crown Prosecution office to extradite Andrei Lugovoi, the chief suspect in the case.

On Russian television, new trends have recently emerged in the coverage of Europe and the EU-Russia relations. These trends have two striking features. First is the tone and style of individual stories offered by Russia's federal TV networks. Second is the focus on major types of "frames" or themes. These are conceptual frameworks which are tapping directly into people's sentiments, such as pride, grievances, resentment, and thus shape their perceptions (see more on the theory of frames in media studies in "*Mediating the message: Theories of influence on mass media content*", White Plains NY: Longman. Tankard J.W/2001). Frames such as "European hypocrisy" or the "Demonisation of Russia," play themselves out in the form of more concrete messages, which reflect mainstream attitudes among the political elites and which are used to justify specific policy actions.

A close look at the "European stories" on Russian television gives the impression that adjustments have been made to Russia's PR strategy at a senior level somewhere.. Overall, the rhetoric has been toned down considerably. Newsreaders and commentators try to avoid clichés and stereotypes in discussing Europe-related stories. Attempts are being made to give more substance to the reports, to explain Russia's position over sensitive foreign policy issues and to produce arguments underpinning statements or actions by the country's leadership.

News content has changed somewhat. Even stories that are not particularly flattering to Russia's image have been covered in detail. A special effort is apparently being made to explore the position of Russia's opponents and to explain the origins of criticism.

Certain conciliatory overtones have emerged in Europe-related discourse. More emphasis is placed on positive aspects of relations with the EU and its member states. Here themes range

from success stories in business to the introduction of the visa facilitation agreement as a step towards the free movement of people.

This new style seems to have been inspired by President Putin's recent public statements. For example, at the press conference following the Samara summit, as well as at press events in Austria and Luxembourg, he repeatedly underscored the need to de-dramatise relations between Russia and Europe. TV audiences back home saw him as a self-confident leader making well argued points and giving technically precise answers to "difficult" questions from Western media.

In fact, most of the frames or themes which emerge in the coverage of Europe and EU-Russia relations on Russian television can be traced back to President Putin's recent public speeches. They fall into five major categories.

1. EU-Russia tensions/Old Europe versus New Europe

It is widely recognised by Russian media that EU-Russia relations have reached a record low point. The fault is largely found with the EU's new member states, which, according to most commentators, exploit and even deliberately inflame anti-Russian sentiments for two reasons: first, they want to assert their role in the EU through their claims to have special expertise on how to deal with Russia. Secondly, these countries are portrayed by Russian opinion formers as Trojan horses used by the US to prevent rapprochement between Russia and the European Union, which would form a greater union and challenge its own position in the world.

The Russian TV audience (and Brussels for that matter) is often reminded of Russia's earlier warnings that admitting all East European countries to the EU at once would complicate relations between the EU and Russia. However, commentators insist that Russia is willing to wait until the new Europeans grow up and shake off their phobias. In the meantime, Moscow appreciates that solutions for some of these bilateral problems can be found in Brussels. Today, the EU leadership is viewed in a positive light, as it embraces Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, Russia's most trustworthy partner, as well as president of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso, who has been praised in TV reports from the Samara summit as a sensible politician.

President Putin's visit to Austria and Luxembourg following the EU-Russia summit was presented as a showcase of Russia's economic and foreign policy success. The reception in both countries was described as very warm. Numerous examples were cited of fast-growing bilateral economic and business ties. The Austrians were praised highly for their respect for history, in particular war memories – in sharp contrast to earlier images of Estonian "vandalism" towards Russia's war memorials which had dominated news reports for months on end.

Commenting on President Putin's visit to Austria and Luxembourg, Alexei Pushkov, a prominent commentator with the TVC, has pointed out that, despite Russia's growing assertiveness in foreign and security policy, "civilized Europeans" meet Russia's president with high regard and increasingly recognise Russia as a major power. They conclude that Russia's criticism of NATO and US plans in Europe, on-going arguments with the EU, and Moscow's reservations over Kosovo might annoy the West, but will never lead to Russia's isolation, as Russia's position is vital for solutions to major international road-blocks. (*"Postscriptum,"* 26 May, TVC)

The nuts and bolts of EU-Russia negotiations

TV programmes pay increased attention to the technical and legal side of EU-Russia relations. Alleged inconsistencies or broken promises on the EU side are reported with comments and detailed explanations of the nature of Russia's claims and complaints.

For example, President Putin has been shown justifying Russia's refusal to fully join the European Energy Charter. He criticised Brussels for having failed to deliver on the promise to fully liberalise the EU market of nuclear materials by 1997. President Putin has also repeatedly linked Russia's firm position over the Polish meat affair to a major issue – the need to protect the interests of Russian farmers against the flood of cheap agricultural products “some of them of dubious quality and origin” from a heavily subsidised EU market,. These two assumptions were later cited and commented upon in various news programmes.

2. Russia's security interests in the wider European context

Russia's opposition to US plans to deploy a new missile defence system in Poland and the Czech Republic is depicted as an illustration of Moscow's broader concerns about European security. TV commentators often point out that Washington “has forgotten” to ask the opinion of (Old) Europe. In a sign that Russia wants to have a say in this matter, President Putin has recently come up with the proposal to channel the debate about missile defence into the OSCE, which is now widely discussed among TV commentators. This could help Moscow to influence the OSCE agenda, viewed by Russian policy makers as overly critical of Russia's human rights record.

3. European hypocrisy

Europe – as part of the West or “international community” - is portrayed as indiscriminately applying double standards. To quote President Putin, “the EU enjoys strategic partnerships with certain countries which have the death penalty or indulge in human rights violations (the base at Guantanamo), which run counter to Europe's own system of values. However, nobody is questioning the need to build strategic relations with these countries.” (First Channel, 18 May)

President Putin has interpreted Europe's support of the “Other Russia” opposition movement as hypocritical and proof that Europe has a hidden agenda. He made the following comment which was used in numerous TV reports: “one of the motives is to support those forces in Russia that some Western politicians believe to be pro-Western... The other aim is to make Russia more pliant on questions which have nothing to do with democracy or human rights. For example, on the issues of missile defence, Kosovo etc.”(NTV, 27 May)

4. Democracy – Ideological debate

The democracy debate has taken a new turn. The theory of Russia's entitlement to home grown “sovereign democracy” seems to have entirely disappeared from the political discourse on Russian TV. New messages centre on history. Observers emphasise that it took hundreds of years for Western European democracies to mature. Russia's case is special, they say, as the country has undergone a drastic transformation of its economy and society. Here President Putin is quoted as admitting that Russia has problems with democracy. However, according to Putin, these problems are rooted in Russia's past and more recent history, i.e. “the collapse of the Soviet Union which was essentially the collapse of the wider Russia, as well as an acute crisis in the Caucasus, massive impoverishment of the population etc. Of course, we need time for

democratic institutions to take off and for the people to adapt to new social conditions". (*Vesti Nedeli*", RTR, 27 May)

5. Demonising Russia

An escalation of anti-Russian attitudes in Western and, in particular, European media has not remained unnoticed by Russian TV observers. This trend is largely seen as triggered by those who oppose Russia's comeback as a strong international player. The Russian spy scandal in the UK is used to illustrate this assumption. The entire sequence of dramatic events, from the death of Russia's ex-secret agent Litvinenko in London to the recent request by British Crown Prosecution office to extradite Andrei Lugovoj, the chief suspect in the case, is viewed as being orchestrated by Putin's opponents and upheld by the British political elite.

There have been no attempts whatsoever to look for reasons for anti-Russian sentiments elsewhere, for example in Russia's ill-conceived or ill-explained foreign policy actions in the near abroad, in its blatant violations of human rights in Chechnya, and the series of political assassinations etc.

Some analysts even offer an esoteric explanation of why Russia's image is so negative in the West. Vyacheslav Nikonov, a prominent Russian commentator, has recently quoted his Canadian friend, who came up with the following explanation of Russophobia: "The main problem is that these Russians have white skin. If they had been green, or pink, or came from Mars...or had flowers sticking out of their ears, then everybody would have said – well, these people are different, like Turks, or Chinese, or Japanese. We have no questions about the Japanese. They are different, their civilisation is different. But these Russians ... they are white but they have totally different brains ... which is thoroughly suspicious."

In summary, EU-Russia relations remain high on the Russian TV news agenda. Russian viewers are reasonably well informed about Europe and the nature of EU-Russia political discourse. Programme makers aim to give a nuanced or enhanced picture, focusing on facts, figures and details. This apparently gives more credibility to Moscow's decisions and initiatives.

Emphasis on facts and avoiding negative stereotypes in TV programmes on European issues now bear comparison with the style of certain European media, which tends to base criticism of Putin's Russia on clichés and suspicions rather than serious arguments. If this trend persists, Russian TV broadcasts outside Russia might start winning the hearts and minds of people in other countries, particularly given the manifest failures in Western foreign policy as witnessed in Iraq and Afghanistan.