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**SUKHONINA NINA ANATOLYEVNA
RUSSIAN MEDIA DISCOURSE ON THE COVERAGE OF
ETHNOPOLITICAL CONFLICTS IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE:
STRATEGIES AND EFFECTS**

5.5.2. Political institutions, processes, technologies

ABSTRACT

of the dissertation submitted for the degree of Candidate of Political Sciences

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Modern political reality is characterized by the increasing complexity and multidimensionality of social processes, in which media communication acts not merely as a channel for transmitting information but as an active factor in constructing political meanings, identities, and perceptions of conflicts. This process acquires particular significance in the context of the space that emerged after the collapse of the USSR, where issues of ethnicity, nation-building, and territorial integrity remain a source of persistent tension and open conflicts. Analyzing the ways these conflicts are represented in the media becomes important for understanding not only their dynamics but also the formation of socio-political discourse and mass consciousness.

The relevance of the chosen topic of the dissertation research is determined by a set of interrelated factors reflecting both current trends in the development of scientific knowledge and acute practical problems of political reality.

Firstly, contemporary scholarship clearly exhibits a steady trend toward the convergence of various disciplines, leading to increased integration and synthesis of methodological approaches and conceptual developments. In this context, examining the complex phenomenon of media discourse solely within the framework of a single scientific paradigm appears methodologically limited and inadequate to the requirements of comprehensive analysis. Despite widespread academic recognition of the need to overcome interdisciplinary barriers in the study of media communications, the implementation of a truly integrative approach to media discourse research remains an insufficiently developed task.

Secondly, the relevance of the research is determined by the persistently high intensity and dynamics of ethno-political conflicts in the post-Soviet space. These conflicts, possessing significant destabilizing potential, are characterized by continuity and constant transformation of their forms of manifestation, requiring systematic scientific monitoring and analysis. However, a comprehensive analysis of the discursive mechanisms and strategies used in such construction requires in-depth development.

Thirdly, the existing body of scholarly work demonstrates considerable interest in studying the mechanisms of forming hate speech, negative images, and antipathy toward states perceived as hostile within the media discourse of various countries. At the same time, the specifics of how ethno-political conflicts are covered in the media discourse of the Russian Federation remain significantly less studied, especially in situations where Russia is not a direct participant but shows a pronounced interest in their resolution.

Finally, fourthly, at present, the scientific community lacks a generalized, theoretically grounded model describing the patterns and specific features of the representation of ethno-political conflicts specifically in the Russian online media segment. The development of such a model seems necessary, since understanding the discursive strategies, linguistic means, and ideological frameworks used in covering these conflicts is a fundamental condition for adequately analyzing the multifaceted influence of media on the formation of mass perceptions, political attitudes, and ultimately on the political processes themselves in the context of complex interethnic relations. Thus, this research aims to fill these theoretical and methodological gaps, which determines its scientific and practical significance.

The object of the study is Russian media discourse in the coverage of ethno-political conflicts.

The subject of the study comprises the strategies and media effects of representing ethno-political conflicts in the post-Soviet space within VKontakte news communities.

The aim of the dissertation research is to identify trends in media discourse regarding the coverage of ethno-political conflicts in the post-Soviet space within Russian VKontakte communities (2014–2024).

To achieve this aim, the following set of tasks must be solved:

1. To synthesize the main theoretical and methodological approaches in political science to the study of the phenomenon of media discourse, formulating its key characteristics.

2. To establish the main strategies of media discourse in covering ethnopolitical conflicts in online media.
3. To create a model for analyzing discursive strategies that makes it possible to identify the features and dynamics of the discursive construction of ethnopolitical conflicts in the post-Soviet space in online media from 2014 to 2024.
4. To determine the media effects of covering ethnopolitical conflicts in online media in 2014–2024.

Research hypothesis. The discursive strategies used by Russian online media (using the example of VKontakte news communities) when covering ethnopolitical conflicts in the post-Soviet space during the period 2014–2024 are characterized by stable specific features (the use of historical analogies, linguistic constructions, semiotic codes, and information selection strategies) and dynamics determined by the changing role of Russia in the conflicts and the overall geopolitical situation. These strategies are systematically aimed at constructing a particular media reality of the conflict, which for the audience becomes dominant over objective eventfulness. As a result, certain media effects are formed (shaping/changing political attitudes, perceptions of identities, legitimization of Russia's foreign policy course) that influence mass consciousness and socio-political discourse.

Territorial scope of the case studies covers the territory of the post-Soviet space, in particular the territory of the Russian Federation, Moldova (including the self-proclaimed Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic), Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia.

Chronological scope of the study covers events from 2014 to 2024 inclusive.

Theoretical and methodological basis of the research. The main methodological foundation for the study of Russian media discourse in the coverage of ethnopolitical conflicts was the systems approach. In addition, a postmodernist approach was applied to study discourse, media discourse, and its effects, within the framework of which it was analyzed how discourses shape social reality, influencing the perception of identity, norms, and values within society.

When analyzing ethnopolitical conflicts in the post-Soviet space, the work employs a dialectical approach. It allows conflicts to be viewed not as static phenomena, but as dynamic processes arising from historical, social, and political changes. The study of ethnopolitical conflicts was also built on the basis of a postmodernist approach. In this framework, ethnopolitical conflicts are seen as an expression of competing narratives, each possessing its own legitimacy. Attention is paid to how linguistic constructions and discourses can justify or exacerbate conflicts.

Research methods. The dissertation uses both general scientific and special methods. Analysis helped to examine different levels and aspects of media discourse and discursive strategies. The model for analyzing discursive strategies for covering ethnopolitical conflicts in the media was created using such a general scientific method as synthesis. The comparative method played a significant role in studying the dynamics of media coverage of ethnopolitical conflicts. Classification as a method was used to divide ethnopolitical conflicts in the post-Soviet space into types.

The historical method made it possible to better understand the dynamics of interaction between ethnic groups, identify the roots of conflicts, and understand their evolution over time. Contextualization of events also plays an important role: specific historical moments, such as wars, revolutions, influence the formation of ethnopolitical identities and relations.

The main special methods for analyzing media discourse were:

- the method of qualitative and quantitative content analysis;
- Ruth Wodak's discourse-historical analysis method;
- Teun van Dijk's critical discourse analysis method.

Ethnopolitical conflicts were studied using methods of political analysis: event analysis and case studies.

The empirical basis of the research consists of:

- 810 posts and 7,689 comments on them in news communities of the social network VKontakte, namely "RIA Novosti", "RBK", "RT na russkom" and

"Komsomolskaya Pravda", indirectly or directly related to the Georgian-South Ossetian, Georgian-Abkhaz, or Moldovan-Pridnestrovian conflicts, published from January 1, 2014 to December 31, 2024;

- Open data from the company "Medialogia" – an automated system for monitoring and analyzing media and social networks in real time.

The scientific novelty of the research results is as follows:

1. The content of the concepts "discourse" and "media discourse" has been clarified in relation to the tasks of political analysis. An original five-level model for analyzing discursive strategies has been developed and tested, integrating the tools of critical discourse analysis, media linguistics, and semiotics for studying the representation of ethno-political conflicts in the Russian online media segment.

2. In continuation of the development of existing approaches to media discourse analysis, a set of discursive strategies (historical, linguistic, semiotic, information selection strategies, and non-textual framing strategies) used by Russian VKontakte news communities to construct media images of ethno-political conflicts has been empirically identified and systematized. It has been established that these strategies are systematic and purposeful in nature, acting as an instrument of ideological influence.

3. Based on material from Russian VKontakte news communities from 2014–2024, an analysis of the coverage of key ethno-political conflicts in the post-Soviet space (the Georgian-Abkhaz, Georgian-South Ossetian, and Moldovan-Pridnestrovian conflicts) has been conducted for the first time. The study has made it possible to identify the evolution of discursive practices depending on changes in the foreign policy context.

4. The key media effects (shaping political attitudes, legitimizing foreign policy course, influencing the perception of ethnic identities) produced by the identified discursive strategies have been determined and typologized, and their influence on the formation of a "hyperreality" of the conflict, which dominates over objective eventfulness in mass consciousness, has been demonstrated.

Propositions put forward for public defense:

1. Discourse as a complex communicative phenomenon remains in the focus of research attention, acquiring new features in the digital environment. The phenomenon of discourse should be considered as a multidimensional phenomenon: it is simultaneously linguistic practice, social interaction, and a field of ideological struggle. The postmodernist tradition emphasizes the instability of meanings, their dependence on context and power. Media discourse, as a subtype of discourse, has its own specific features: it is mass-oriented, purposeful, and dependent on technological platforms. It is a hybrid, combining features of institutional (normativity) and everyday (interactivity) communication. In the digital age, its boundaries are blurring: social networks and online media turn the audience into a co-author of content, transforming traditional communication models.

2. The author's model of discursive strategies is based on the premise that these strategies, when covering ethno-political conflicts in online media, can be divided into groups depending on the mechanisms used: historical, linguistic, semiotic, non-textual, and strategies related to information selection. When covering ethno-political conflicts in which Russia is not a direct party but shows interest, Russian media resources consistently and systematically apply the same discursive strategies serving a single purpose. They play a key role in shaping a certain image of Russia, as well as in justifying its foreign and domestic policy. These strategies make it possible to draw parallels between events of specific ethno-political conflicts and Russia's participation in other international crises, which, in turn, contributes to the creation of a narrative that legitimizes state actions and its political decisions.

3. Based on representative cases (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Pridnestrovie), specific regional models of representation in Russian digital media discourse have been identified, demonstrating its adaptability. It is shown how a single central narrative (Russia as a guarantor of stability) is realized through different discursive configurations: through an emphasis on operational crises and dependence (Abkhazia), historical and cultural commonality (South Ossetia), or integration into the macro-political framework of confrontation with the West (Pridnestrovie). The

obtained results reveal the mechanisms of media discourse adaptation to different political contexts within a common ideological paradigm.

4. The analysis of media discourse impact on the audience has shown deep assimilation by the audience of key discursive frames, especially the narrative of Russia as a "defender." At the same time, perception varied: from the greatest consensus around the idea of "reunification" with South Ossetia to pragmatism, cynicism, and fatigue expressed in discussions of Pridnestrovian issues, which are perceived as a problematic periphery of the "Russian world."

The theoretical significance of the dissertation research lies in its contribution to the development of interrelated scientific fields: the theory of political media discourse and postmodern media theory.

The work overcomes the descriptive nature of many studies by offering a model for analyzing discursive strategies as a tool for simulating and constructing the hyperreality of conflict. The research demonstrates how, in the conditions of the postmodern media environment, discursive practices not so much reflect as they replace and predetermine political processes. The work verifies and concretizes key concepts of postmodern thought (simulacrum, hyperreality, narrative fragmentation) on extensive empirical material. It clearly shows how the logic of media production described by Baudrillard operates in the political sphere. Thus, the dissertation helps bridge the gap between abstract philosophical critique of media and applied political analysis.

Overall, the theoretical significance lies not in simply supplementing existing areas of knowledge, but in proposing a holistic interdisciplinary approach that views contemporary ethno-political conflict as a fundamentally mediatized phenomenon requiring the simultaneous analysis of political, sociological, and discursive mechanisms of its construction.

The practical significance of the main research results lies in the fact that they can be used by media outlets to develop more balanced and objective strategies for covering ethno-political conflicts. Awareness of discursive methods and their impact on public opinion will help avoid manipulation and stereotyping. Based on

the research findings, educational programs can be created for students and professionals in the fields of media policy, journalism, political science, and sociology.

Validation of the research results. The dissertation was discussed at meetings of the Department of Socio-Political Theories of P.G. Demidov Yaroslavl State University. The main results of the research were tested and published in 15 scientific works, including 5 articles in leading peer-reviewed journals recommended by the Higher Attestation Commission (VAK) of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, and 1 article in a publication indexed in the Scopus database.

The main provisions of the research were presented at various foreign, international, and all-Russian scientific conferences.

The dissertation consists of an introduction, two chapters, a conclusion, and a list of sources.

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