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„Understanding Austria from the Russian Perspective –
How Austrian Politics and Austrian Russian Relations are
depicted in the Russian state-controlled news outlet RT.
A comparison of governments from Kurz I to Nehammer I“

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“Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored.”

Aldous Huxley in *Proper Studies* (1927)

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Abstract

English:

This master thesis scrutinizes the Russian state-backed news-outlet RT (formerly Russia Today) and its reporting on Austrian politics from the time of the government Kurz I until after the start of the Ukraine war. RT is looked on as politically relevant as it has been considered to be a tool of information warfare. The thesis attempts to answer the central research question of how Austrian politics are depicted in reporting through analyzing media bias. The mixed-methods approach to measuring media bias included an actor-centric qualitative content analysis, an explorative media bias rating scale and frequency tables of issues reported on (capturing the aspect of agenda setting). The results show that on average Austrian politics are depicted in a negative light before and after the start of the Ukraine war during the Nehammer I government period. The most negatively biased reporting occurred during the Nehammer I government period before the start of the Ukraine war. RT reporting attempted to add to a polarizing debate as it casted doubt about the legitimacy of the Austrian government (in the context of the covid pandemic), Austrian media as well as on Austria's neutral status. It portrayed the populist right party FPÖ and the covid demonstrations in a positive light. The results were embedded in different theories that facilitated contextual understanding. The thesis demonstrated that RT has applied tactics used in information warfare against Austria.

Key words: RT/Russia Today, information war, strategic narrative, soft power, sharp power, postmodernism, Austrian Russian bilateral relations, Sebastian Kurz, Alexander Schallenberg, Karl Nehammer, Vladimir Putin, covid pandemic, polarization, disinformation.

Deutsch:

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht das staatliche russische Nachrichtenmedium RT (ehemals Russia Today) und ihre Berichterstattung über die österreichische Politik ab der Regierung Kurz I bis nach Beginn des Ukrainekrieges. RT wurde deshalb ausgewählt, weil das Medium mit russischer Informationskriegsführung in Verbindung gesetzt wird. Die vorliegende Arbeit versucht die Frage nach der Art der Darstellung Österreichs in der RT-Berichterstattung durch die Analyse des Media Bias zu beantworten. Ein Mixed-Methods Ansatz wurde für die Medienbias-Analyse zusammengestellt und umfasst eine akteurs-zentrierte qualitative Inhaltsanalyse, eine explorative Medienbias – Skala sowie statistische Tabellen, die die relative und absolute Häufigkeit von Themen in der Berichterstattung eruierten, um den Aspekt des Agenda Settings einzufangen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass österreichische Politik in der Regierungsperiode von Nehammer I vor dem Ukrainekrieg und nach dem Ukrainekrieg mit einem negativen Bias dargestellt wird. Die am negativsten dargestellte Periode war während der Nehammer I Regierung vor dem Beginn des Ukrainekrieges. Die RT-Berichterstattung entwickelte polarisierende Diskurselemente, wo sie Zweifel über die Legitimität der

österreichischen Regierung im Kontext der Covid-Pandemie, der österreichischen Medien sowie der österreichischen Neutralität sähte. Über die rechtspopulistische Partei FPÖ und die Coronademonstrationen berichtete RT in einem positiven Licht. Die Ergebnisse wurden in unterschiedliche Theorien eingebettet, um diese zu kontextualisieren. Im Fall von Österreich konnte nachgewiesen werden, dass RT sich Taktiken der Informationskriegsführung bedient.

Schlagwörter: RT/Russia Today, Informationskrieg, strategische Narrative, soft power, sharp power, Postmodernismus, Österreich-Russland bilaterale Beziehungen, Sebastian Kurz, Alexander Schallenberg, Karl Nehammer, Vladimir Putin, Covid-Pandemie, Polarisierung, Desinformation.

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1. Introduction

My interest in the issue of RT, formerly Russia Today, has to do with my former colleagues at university, at work and during my Erasmus semester at the University of Bologna. In conversations before the start of the Ukraine war, they talked about RT in a positive manner. Some of them were graduates (or soon-to-be graduates) of the social sciences and the humanities. It wasn't entirely clear to me what RT was. I have read news on RT quite rarely, as I never was entirely sure of the background of the media outlet and because I simply preferred other news outlets from the beginning. I remember a former colleague, who was very fond of RT. So much so, he announced to apply to the media outlet. Another colleague once said, he seriously considered to apply for an internship at RT in their Berlin office, however, ultimately changing his mind about the application. The first colleague had studied philosophy and international relations, the second was a historian and a political science graduate. At the time, RT was presented to me as an alternative to the mainstream news with a serious appearance. The Russian background seemingly didn't matter, really. The interlinkage of (political) information and politics interests me and the case of RT picked my curiosity, especially after the start of the Ukraine war and the subsequent prohibition of RT news by the European Union.

When the cold-war era ended, the West did not expect Russia to continue certain aspects of information warfare the Soviet Union applied against the West. It did not expect old hostility to continue in modern day Russia (Snegovaya 2015). The attempt to offer alternative news has become apparent in the sphere of information diffusion, such as TV stations and online news outlets. Not unique to Russia, global news outlets have been created by authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes to offer alternative perspectives within the Western world. Besides Russia, this has been done by China with CCTV, Qatar with Al Jazeera or Turkey with TRT. The internet with the hyper-connectivity of social media has facilitated this availability of ever more news options (Xie & Boyd-Barrett 2015).

RT (formerly Russia Today) is a central Russian state-backed news outlet that goes far beyond the borders of the largest country of the world. It has offered news from Arabic to English, German, Spanish and Russian across the globe. However, RT has been considered also to be a tool in international relations, in relations between Russia and other individual countries. It attempts to offer alternative narratives on political developments. Strategic narratives have become a term to understand this phenomenon more closely (Miskimmon et al. 2018).

While the relations between Russia and many Western countries, for example, have been characterized with a certain distant relationship (of course before the Ukraine war), Austria and Russia have undergone a dynamic change in their bilateral relations in recent years. During the government Kurz I, Russia and Austria have been considered to be closer than ever. However, this changed in the subsequent governments and ended in today's very cooled status, as Austria condemns the war in the Ukraine (The Economist 2022). Nevertheless, Austria has remained its neutral status before and after the start of the Ukraine (Janik 2024).

This master thesis attempts to understand how Austria moves within RT reporting against the backdrop of changing Austrian governments, changing bilateral relations between Austria and Russia as well as permanent neutrality - with the following research question:

“How does the Russian state-backed media outlet “RT” depict and position Austrian politics and Austrian-Russian relations throughout the changing governments from Kurz I until after the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war?”

The master thesis is structured in the following way:

The **conceptual framework of analysis** delineates four central parts to the research endeavor: 1) the research questions, 2) the hypotheses, 3) the theories as well as 4) the methods applied.

The **research questions** are grouped by the already mentioned main research question and three facilitating sub-questions that are directed at how a potential media bias might express itself, how actors and issues are formed within this potential media bias.

The **hypotheses** are developed based on the assumption that RT would apply reporting in a strategic way (embedded in information war tactics). The expectation is that information war tactics might work in liaison with actual war, namely the Ukraine war. Logically, this information war waged by Russia would be directed towards the West, which Putin has condemned in the past (Fusiek 2022). While Austria is part of the West, it has its idiosyncrasies that make it different from other Western countries. Austria and Russia have had a unique history of bilateral relations during Putin's Russia. Furthermore, Austria is and has remained a neutral country, unlike other countries, who are NATO members.

Finding a logical middle ground between Austrian neutrality and deteriorating bilateral relations, I argue for hypotheses that expect positive reporting on Austrian politics before the start of the Ukraine war (H1) and negative reporting on Austrian politics after the start of the Ukraine war (H2).

In the **theories** section, I introduce various theories that are relevant for the contextual understanding of RT reporting. I introduce the reader to information warfare, strategic narratives, soft and sharp power, postmodernism and knowledge democracy. The reason why I offer this large number of theories is because I want to facilitate understanding from different perspectives.

The **literature review** offers an overview of what has been researched on RT so far.

The chapter “**Preliminary Analysis**” I offer a contextual analysis, which describes the communicator RT as an actor. Furthermore, I deliberate on ethical considerations during the sampling process given RT’s prohibition by the European Union. Lastly, I engage with the concrete process of the qualitative content analysis.

In the “**Analyses of Government Phases**” chapter, I present the results of the actor-centric qualitative content analysis, the tables on topic frequency and results of the media bias rating process. The hypotheses are discussed for each of the five government phases at the end of each sub-chapter.

The “**Discussion**” chapter summons and interprets the overall findings comparatively in regard to the hypotheses, the research questions as well as the theories.

The conclusion sums up the master thesis and gives an outlook on how further research based on the findings could look like.

This thesis follows an approach of understanding. It attempts to further the understanding of what RT does in relation to Austria.

2. Conceptual Framework of Analysis

The conceptual framework of analysis provides key elements of the thesis. It contains an engulfing introduction to:

- 1) Research Questions (Chapter 2.1.)
- 2) Hypotheses (Chapter 2.2.)
- 3) Theories (Chapter 2.3.)
- 4) Methods (Chapter 2.4.)

2.1. Research Questions

This master thesis uses a central research question (RQ 1) as well as sub-questions (RQ 1.1, 1.2, 1.3) that allow for a more structured approach to researching the empirical material.

In the following I put forward the research questions that are directed at the source material of the 97 sampled RT articles.

The main research question is:

RQ 1: How does the Russian state-backed media outlet “RT” depict and position Austrian politics and Austrian-Russian relations throughout the changing governments from Kurz I until after the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war?

Sub-questions to this research question are the following:

RQ 1.1: Is there a media bias in RT reporting concerning politics in Austria? If yes, how does media bias in RT reporting express itself?

RQ 1.2: How are actors shown within this media bias??

RQ 1.3: How are topics shown within this media bias?

The sub-questions are intended to complement the endeavor of answering the main research question.

The research question RQ 1 “**How does RT depict and position Austrian politics and Austrian-Russian relations throughout the changing governments from Kurz I until after the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war?**” offers relevance in two subfields of Political Science. It is relevant to the discipline of Austrian Politics, as RT informed readers (in the German speaking world in the case of RT Deutsch) on Austrian political

developments, policy fields, and important political actors, such as the government or the opposition parties.

International Relations make up the second discipline, in which this research question can be situated. The interference of the information environment of liberal Western democratic societies by an autocratic regime can be found in scholarship on information warfare, and works on soft and sharp power (Glazunova et al. 2022). Adding to this international relations dimension there is the European Union action of banning RT diffusion within the EU (European Union 2022). It appears that the EU has felt a threat emanating from RT reporting to Western liberal democratic societies soon after the beginning of the war in the Ukraine.

2.2. Hypotheses

This chapter shows how the hypotheses used in this master thesis have been developed.

The Russian president Vladimir Putin has considered the “West” to be a threat for Russia (Fusiek 2022). This hostility towards the West has translated to Russian media reporting on Western countries, for example Sweden or Baltic countries (Kragh & Åsberg 2017; Mölder & Sazonov 2020; see Literature Review). RT has been considered to apply information war tactics (Glazunova et al. 2022).

Austria could be considered different to other Western countries due to its unique history of bilateral relations with Russia as well as due to its neutrality. The Ukraine war could be a shifting point, in which RT starts applying information war tactics in its reporting on Austrian.

In the past, Vladimir Putin’s rhetoric has been directed towards the West, in which he considers the West to be aggressive and hostile towards Russia as well as a threat (Fusiek 2022). This hostility is translated to reporting on Western countries within Russian state-backed media, such as “RT”. This has been shown for RT reporting on some European countries, such as Sweden, where reporting has been about “sowing doubt” about the integrity of democratic institutions (Kragh & Åsberg 2017), or the Baltic countries, where reporting on Covid attempted to deepen tensions between Russia and the Baltic states by narrating Baltic countries as russophobic (Mölder & Sazonov 2020).

RT can be considered to be a tool in information warfare used by the Russian government to spread confusion, malinformation or narratives with strategic aims aligned to Russian state interests (Glazunova et al. 2022).

The central enigma concerning RT reporting on Austria is the question: Does Russia see itself at “information war” with Austria? This cannot be answered in a straightforward way. Russia has not declared war against Austria, neither “information war” declarations have been issued by any Russian authority. Whether Russia is conducting any form of information warfare against a country can only be understood by examining the Russian effects in the information realm. The expectation is that information war often is not black or white, but has many shades of grey. In the theory section, information warfare is introduced more closely.

Austria is part of the West. However, it isn’t entirely clear whether Russian hostility towards the West also applies to Austria given its unique features as a Western country. It is necessary to point out two central elements that make Austria different compared to other “Western countries”.

First, Austria and Russia have had close ties in diplomatic terms. Second, Austria is a neutral country and subsequently it is not part of the military alliance NATO.

2.2.1. Austrian Russian Bilateral Relations

The relations between Austria and Russia have been considered to be positive in the past. However, it has been subject to change. Especially during the first government period Kurz I, Vladimir Putin and Sebastian Kurz had close bilateral relations. In 2018 Putin visited Austria four times. These positive relations were reinforced by the former foreign minister Karin Kneissl, who invited Vladimir Putin to her wedding in 2018, as she was still the foreign minister in office. The relations between Austria and Russia gradually started to loosen after the demise of the government Kurz I. Factors that played a role in this gradual decline of the positive relations are firstly the new foreign minister Alexander Schallenberg, who is an Atlanticist, but also a seasoned diplomat. Another factor is Austria’s full support for sanctions against Russia after the beginning of the Ukraine war despite Austria’s neutrality (Cede & Mangott 2023).

The government of ÖVP and FPÖ (Kurz I), which started in 2017, had been very friendly towards the Russian Federation. The reasons for this are manifold. The populist right Freedom party FPÖ is a pronounced pro-Russian party and has shown sympathy for Russia in many occasions. This is exemplified by the friendship contract between the FPÖ and the party of Vladimir Putin, United Russia, that was initiated in 2016, but allegedly was not renewed (Der Standard 2023) .

The foreign minister of the government Kurz I was Karin Kneissl. Formally non-affiliated to any party, but nominated by the FPÖ to her post, she, as well, is considered to be pro-Russian. She reached international headlines after Putin showed up to her wedding, while she still was in office and danced with her. She knelt down after the dance with Vladimir Putin, furthering the notion of submission towards Russia. After her departure from the foreign minister post, she became a commentator on RT and has been appointed to the management board of Rosneft in 2021. She stayed there until 2022 (Der Standard 2022).

Another central factor in positive relations with Russia - according to the authors Franz Cede and Gerhard Mangott - is the chancellor Sebastian Kurz himself as a central initiator of foreign policy (Cede & Mangott 2022: 569). Sebastian Kurz invested much attention towards ameliorating relations with Vladimir Putin. Alone in 2018, Sebastian Kurz and Vladimir Putin personally met four times. This is not merely explained by the Austrian chair of the Council of the EU. In the meetings between both politicians, the bilateral character was emphasized. In June 2018, Putin had visited Austria the sixth time as president of Russia. Sebastian Kurz himself also visited Putin in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, as well as during the wedding of Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl. Putin attempted to leave behind the political and diplomatic isolation of Russia imposed by the West. These high frequency visits should resolve, how dialogue between Russia and EU-Institutions could be re-initiated. The aim of Sebastian Kurz was to function as a bridge between the EU and Russia, however, economic and cultural bilateral interests were at the centre of attention as well. The end result of these diplomatic endeavors did not amount to Russia and the EU becoming closer. The Austrian position within the European Union was too weak to change the EU's policy towards Russia (Cede & Mangott 2022: *ibid*).

A common thread in relations towards Russia had been the non-mentioning on the Austrian side of the human rights situation in Russia. In the 2018 Russian election the opposition had not been allowed to freely use their passive electoral rights. Aleksej Navalnij had not been admitted to the election. Especially uncritical of this context was the Austrian president Alexander van der Bellen, who met Putin after the Russian election of 2018 and stated that Russia did not have a problem of trustworthiness (Salzburger Nachrichten 2018).

In the government terms of Sebastian Kurz another larger incident was the espionage affair in fall 2018, in which a retired Austrian member of the Armed Forces (Bundesheer), it was discovered, had spied more than 20 years for Russia. Austria demonstrated against this publicly. The Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl canceled a planned visit to Moscow for fall

2018. However, she then visited Moscow just a few months later in February 2019. Irritations had dissolved by then (Cede & Mangott 2022: 571).

The “Sotschi-Dialogue” was initiated in that visit in February 2019, in which the idea was to bring together experts, politicians and representatives of civil society that should address issues of culture, sports, science and education. This dialogue started in May 2019 with the aim of deepening bilateral relations. Independent representatives of civil society were absent, however. Pressing issues such as the rule of law, the fight against corruption as well as civil rights did not find a place in these dialogues. The issues that were discussed were not controversial. The dialogue therefore lacked relevance (ibid).

With the end of the coalition between ÖVP and FPÖ on 19 May 2019, soon after the transitory expert government, a re-election in 2019 followed. The government Kurz II, a coalition between ÖVP and the Greens, formed at the beginning of 2020. The Russian friendly foreign policy was discontinued (Cede & Mangott 2022). .

There were six reasons for this:

1. The pro-Russian FPÖ was no longer in the government
2. The new coalition partner, The Greens, were more critical of Russia regarding the human rights situation in Russia
3. There was a new spy scandal
4. There was a hacker attack on the Austrian Foreign Ministry, very likely carried out from Russia.
5. Reportedly, there was pressure from the U.S.A. and Germany to roll back the special path in relations with Russia.
6. The new Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg has no special affinity for Russia. He is committed to EU integration and is a convinced transatlanticist who seeks and supports Austria's proximity to the USA (Cede & Mangott 2022: 571).

The cooled relationship was exemplified by the instance, when Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov visited Vienna in September 2019 and Alexander Schallenberg publicly voiced concern about the human and civil rights situation in Russia.

With the new government, that took office under the chancellor Alexander Schallenberg on 11 October 2021 (Schallenberg I), the critical position of Alexander Schallenberg towards

Russia had a larger impact on the foreign policy of Austria towards Russia (Cede & Mangott 2022: 571f).

The government of chancellor Karl Nehammer (Nehammer I), the former interior minister, shifted Alexander Schallenberg back to the post of Foreign Minister. At first, Karl Nehammer supported the launch of the gas pipeline Nord Stream 2, with the adage that Russian-Ukrainian relations should not be in the way. This argument was carried by his concern for Austrian and European energy security. This changed, however, when the EU applied a sanction package against Russia after the attack on the Ukraine. Chancellor Nehammer also supported this fully. He was cited condemning Russia as “unilaterally responsible for starting the war and for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by Russian troops on Ukrainian population and territory” (Skrabacz 2021: 62). The Russian diplomatic response was to question the neutrality of Austria as well as reminding Austria of the Soviet liberation of the Austrian territory from the Nazi-terror during World War 2. The Austrian Foreign Ministry responded by saying that Austria remains neutral, but cannot be neutral in regard to serious threats towards freedom, territorial integrity and sovereignty of another country (Skrabacz 2021: 61).

2.2.2. Austrian Neutrality

Neutrality in regard to international relations constitutes a non-partisanship in a situation of armed conflict between two or more states. This means no party shall be supported through direct support in their military actions or through indirect support by allowing troops to be stationed on the ground of the neutral country or arms supply. Furthermore, it isn't permitted to trigger an armed conflict (Senn 2022: 24).

Austrian neutrality has continuously been a central aspect in Austria's international positioning. Hence, Austria is not allowed to join a military alliance, participate in a foreign war nor allow foreign troops to station on Austrian land. The core of neutrality is of military nature. Austrian neutrality has not been defined through a passive non-partisanship, though. Historically, Austria followed an active foreign policy, which has been visible through Austria's accession to the United Nations (1955), the council of Europe (1956), the EFTA (1960) and the European Union (1995). Austria developed an active neutrality policy during the chancellor Bruno Kreisky, who actively promoted peace endeavors in multilateral diplomatic contexts. Today, Austria's military has been participating in acts of international solidarity and contributed to peace-building, as the Austrian military has been sending troops

to international deployments under mandates of the UN-security council. This has been a requirement of engaged neutrality (Gärtner 2015).

Austria's behavior in the context of the Ukraine war has not constituted a breach of neutrality law. Austria has not provided any arms to the Ukraine. Financial support to the Ukraine in the context of EU support, given Austria's relatively small share among the 27 member states, did not violate neutrality law. Turning to sanctions, they are fully compatible with the Austrian neutrality legal requirements. Economic sanctions, for example, that are carried out by EU members are not considered to fall under "force" of the Article 2(4) UN Charter and decidedly not under war. Again, Austrian neutrality is legally limited to its military core that does not allow military support to parties of war (Janik 2024: 152-153).

2.2.3. Synthesis of the Hypotheses

The examined timeframe of the master thesis goes from the Kurz I government to the time after the start of the Ukraine war. So the context is such that Russia and Austria started off with a very close bilateral relationship and then subsequently loosened ties. In the timespan, Austria also remained its neutral status. Furthermore, RT reporting is considered to work along the logic of information war (Glazunova et al. 2022).

I considered two arguments for the development of the hypotheses:

The first argument points to the bilateral relations that worsen right after the first phase (of Kurz I). Following a logic that links bilateral relations and type of reporting in RT on Austria, information warfare would be waged as soon as the bilateral relations worsen, hence as of Kurz II and subsequently deepens.

The second argument points to the permanent status of Austrian neutrality. By definition, neutral countries are not considered to be a threat. Hence it does not make sense to ever wage information warfare against a neutral country. Following this logic, Russia would never wage information warfare against Austria.

As both arguments could be at play at the same time, I argue for a middle ground between the first and the second argument. Information warfare only becomes logically warranted against the entire "West" (including Austria) as soon as Russia enters the war with the Ukraine in 2022. Before the Ukraine war, Russia has no incentive to apply information war tactics against a neutral country. Hence, the following hypotheses were developed:

H1: RT reports positively on Austrian politics before the Ukraine war.

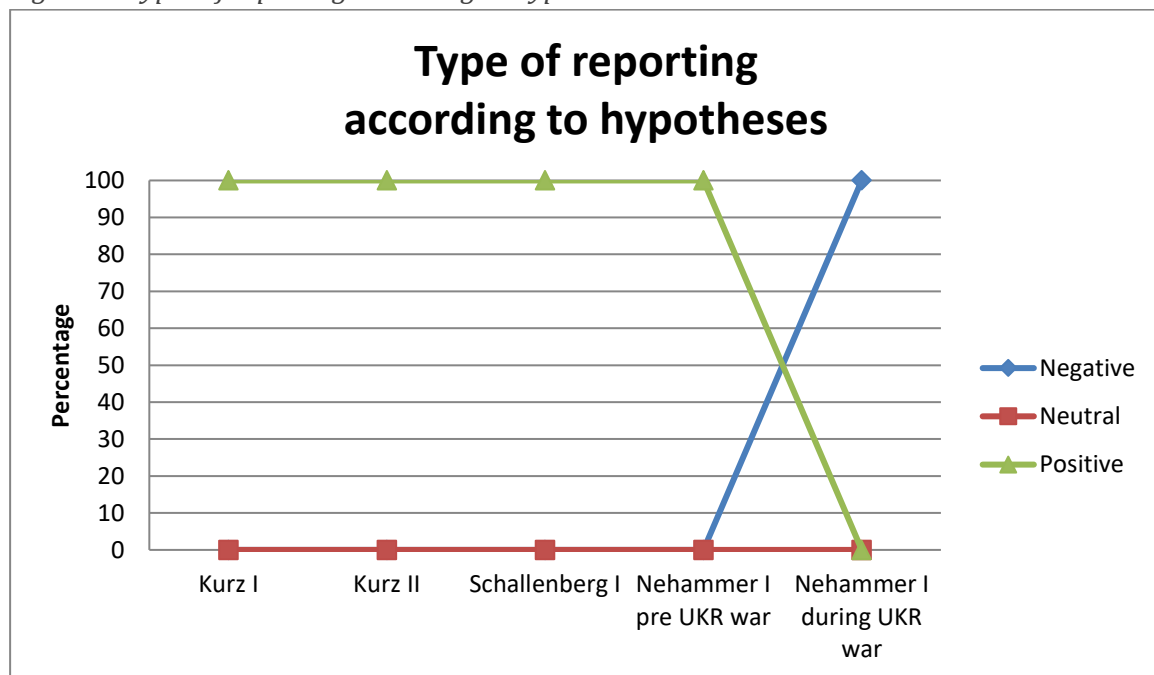
H2: RT reports negatively on Austrian politics after the start of the Ukraine war.

The term Austrian politics incorporates both domestic and foreign politics (issues of diplomacy). In the discussion section, each period will also be compared in order to draw conclusions.

The measurement of positive and negative reporting was conducted through an explorative media bias rating scale procedure. A total of 97 RT articles were sampled and placed on the scale. In the methods section a close deliberation of the methodological approach can be found.

In the following figure 1, the hypotheses are shown in the categories used to measure media bias in RT reporting for the entire timespan (from Kurz I until after the start of the Ukraine war).

Figure 1: Types of reporting according to hypotheses



Source: own design.

2.3. Theories Relevant to Understanding RT

This section will walk the reader through central theoretical underpinnings of approaching the research question mentioned above. It addresses information warfare, strategic narratives, soft and sharp power, postmodernism as well as knowledge democracy.

2.3.1. Information Warfare

Information Warfare can be subsumed under the term Unconventional Warfare. Latter can mean “non-traditional forms of warfare”. Now what can be understood as non-traditional then? It is that which does not occur on the battlefield with guns and bombs, but within the psychology of the civil societies, in the cyberspace and elsewhere beyond the immediate use of weapons (cp. Boyer & Lindley-French 2012: 185, cited in Geuvers 2017).

Information plays a crucial role in the broader scope of conflict and war. Anne Wells Branscomb states that "in virtually all societies, control of and access to information became instruments of power, so much so that information came to be bought, sold, and bartered by those who recognized its value" (Branscomb 1994: 1). “Branscomb could have added, stolen and protected as well”, the author Libicki (1995: 7) noted. I would add: manipulated and distorted in the context of information warfare.

Information warfare has been categorized by Martin C. Libicki (1995: x) in the following elements:

1. Command-and-control warfare
(which tries to cut off the information flow of the military command from the soldiers on the field, e.g.)
2. Intelligence-based warfare
(systems that seek enough information on the battlefield)
3. Electronic warfare
(cryptographic techniques or radio-electronic)
4. Psychological warfare
(where information is utilized in order to change opinions, minds of enemies and even friends)
5. “Hacker” warfare
(the technical hacking of computer systems)

6. Economic information warfare

(in order to achieve economic dominance by channeling or blocking economic information)

7. Cyberwarfare

(cyber attacks and defense occurring on the cyber space, e.g. the internet)

They all can be to some extent interrelated.

The aspect of RT reporting - this thesis is dedicated to - can be subsumed under the psychological warfare aspect as it attempts to reach the minds of readers and viewers across the globe in various different languages.

An impressive example of psychological warfare occurred (long before RT existed) during the combats between the United States and Somali forces in Somalia in the early 1990s. In a military confrontation, nineteen US rangers died, however, fifteen times more soldiers of warlord Mohammed Aideed died, that was considered a third of their might. Pictures and videos of dead US soldiers being dragged by cars through Mogadisho, amid crowds cheering on the sight of what was objectively disturbing, went to CNN and were transmitted to the United States. This had a strong effect on the American TV audiences, which were disenchanted about this development. The US forces ended up leaving. Arguably, the warlord Mohammed Aideed won this information war, which had rippling effects on traditional war (Libicki 1995: 36).

A related – overlapping - concept is that of hybrid war. It is characterized as a “broader spectrum of tactics, also including espionage, cyberattacks, subversion, corruption and targeted kidnapping and assassination”(Lucas & Pomeranzev 2016: 11). It is about the interconnected nature of various tactics, in the West understood as the concomitant use of military, political, economic, and informational policies (ibid) or some elements thereof.

Components within this non-kinetic field of hybrid warfare can include the following:

- The strategic use of corruption, both for acquiring influence and blackmailing;
- Investing into political parties, think tanks, media outlets, and even academic institutions;
- Cyber attacks, which can include denial-of-service, manipulating data, and assaults on critical infrastructure;
- The spread of propaganda, which can be both obvious and less obvious.

- Engaging parties within organized crime, that gather information, intimidate adversaries, passing on financial flows to specific groups, and demoralizing other groups;
- Economic tactics can be used in order to sanction, allow privileged market entry, or instrumentalise pricing (of particular relevance in energy exports);
- Exploiting divisions of ethnic, linguistic, regional, religious, and societal nature within the targeted society (Lucas & Pomeranzev 2016: 12).

In the case of Russia, it has been expected that clashes will move away from physical towards “contactless war”, towards a war more concerned with consciousness of people and moving in the cyberspace (Bērziņš 2020). Of course, this has been proven wrong with the attack on the Ukraine.

The use of economic, information and cyber warfare is aimed at psychological subversion and augmenting uncertainty within a targeted nation or region. A combination can include low-level conventional as well as special operations, attacks in cyberspace and psychological operations that utilize traditional media formats as well as social media that target international opinion and public perception (The International Institute for Strategic Studies 2015).

Lucas & Pomeranzev (2016: 5) write: “The Russian government’s use of information warfare—‘disinformation’—differs from traditional forms of propaganda. Its aim is not to convince or persuade, but rather to undermine. Instead of agitating audiences into action, it seeks to keep them hooked and distracted, passive and paranoid. Inside Russia, this concept is known as ‘information-psychological war’ “. It is applied permanently during times of peace and war and is transmitted throughout the world (ibid).

2.3.1.1. Continuities from the Soviet Union to Modern Day Russia

There has been a form of continuity from the Soviet times to today's Russia in regard to information policy of the government. But there are also discontinuities, as the agenda of the Kremlin is not promoted straightforward, but more indirectly. The information war is calibrated (more or less carefully) in order to distract and confuse. The aim of eroding values of the Western world is understood to augment Russia's relative power. Information warfare deepens the economic, ideological as well as the geopolitical competition, especially in areas, such as the Baltic area and Eastern Europe, where American and Russian interests collide (Lucas & Pomeranzev 2016: 2).

The application of information warfare of today's Russia traces back to the so-called "spetspropaganda", which was taught in the Russian Military Institute of Foreign Languages as a subject as of 1942. It also traces back to "agitprop" of the time following the Russian Revolution. "Agitprop" stems from the etymologies of both agitation (speech) and propaganda (words). Propaganda and dezinformatsiya (disinformation) were prominent in the Cold War era, however, contrary to convictions among Western leaders, this did not finish after the end of the Cold War (Lucas & Pomeranzev 2016: 6).

Following the demise of the Soviet Union, the propaganda apparatus actually was not disbanded, but re-established. It is considered that Valentin Falin, initially the leading figure of the Novosti Press Agency, and subsequently, running the International Department within the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was a key figure in re-establishing this system, of which the establishment of RT and Sputnik news are included (cited in Lucas & Pomeranzev 2016: 6).

Three central continuities from the USSR times are summarized as follows (Lucas & Pomeranzev 2016: 7):

- Fake news

Fake news, being the presentation of news not based in reality, are generated through a centralized way, which are in line with the Russian information policies and communication regulations. This has its roots in the Soviet era.

- Reflexive control

This is a form of warfare in which the attack doesn't physically dismantle the adversary from the external, but instead makes them collapse from within, brought about by "self-

disorientation" and "self-disorganization". A cautiously planted rumor, forgery, or agents of influence can be included here. "A carefully constructed, false message that is secretly introduced into the opponent's communication system to deceive either his decision-making elite or public opinion", Ladislav Bittman, a KGB defector wrote in 1985 (Bittman 1987; cit. in Pynnöniemi & Rácz 2016: 37)

This reflexive control in the case of modern day Russia is about generating more domestic pressure within a foreign country or region to choose a decision most in line with Russian objectives. This was observed in the case of the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, in which lots of doubt was sowed about the military action of Russia. The USA and Europe did not decide to confront Russia decisively about this issue (Snegovaya 2015: 7).

- Active measures

Another element, that draws from the Soviet Union arsenal involves the so-called "active measures" which involves covert interventions in the politics of foreign nations. Active measures can be:

- Shaping the policies of the foreign nation;
- Eroding trust in the establishment and lead figures;
- Irritating the international relations of given foreign country;
- Tarnishing and discrediting non-governmental as well as governmental opponents (Lucas & Pomeranzev 2016).

The political analyst and scholar Maria Snegovaya argues that Russian information warfare is characterized by a lack of innovation from the time since the Soviet Union, as the tactics are taken from this time. Concerning the principles, Snegovaya even goes as far as ascertaining that they were all drawn from the Soviet tool box (Snegovaya 2015: 12).

While these tools are rooted in Soviet Union, there is a different kind of approach today. Before in olden communist times, the propagandists of the Kremlin would keep their messages based in left ideology among which anti-colonialism as well as labour issues found their place. This has been replaced in today's Russian approach. Instead of this ideological foundation, the foundation has been more about post-modernist doubt concerning the liberal Western society and its values. The role of democracy and that of politicians is seen as highly troubled. Contemporary messages throughout the various networks and formats are often contradictory. They support far-right as well as far left movements as well as protests

spanning the full political range. The umbrella unifying these different messages is a deep-seeded mistrust against the system (Lucas & Pomeranzev 2016: 7).

Targeted messages are sent to different political groups in order to deepen polarization in democracy. Examples are: in Slovakia, messages are sent regarding German domination within the EU decision making. French right-wingers would receive content regarding defending the Christian faith in Europe. Greens would get messages about how American military presence in Europe threatens peace. The list goes on. In regard to social movements, Russia does not have to invent any political groups but can support existing left-wing anti-imperialist movements in one country and time, and in the next country Russia could support fascist or conservativist movements in order to deepen ongoing (polarizing) campaigns (Lucas & Pmeranzev 2016: 8).

Additionally, given that – conceptually - information war is quite old, new technological circumstances and innovations in infrastructure have changed the face of information warfare as well. Coordination, the capacity of technological integration as well as further potential opportunities arose with the growth of internet technologies, grid and network (Snegovaya 2015: 14).

Another tool in the tool box of information warfare is to deceive others about what Russia is actually doing. The attempts to obfuscate are guided by the so-called **4-D approach**, that goes as follows:

- **Dismiss:** in the case of the annexation of Crimea, Putin dismissed this for over a month.
- **Distort:** this entails generating false information based on actors, such as pro-Russian Ukrainians offering stories that fit the Russian narrative.
- **Distract:** in the case of the downing of the Malaysian flight 17, Russian media added misleading theories about this incident.
- **Dismay:** The Russian diplomatic envoy to Denmark issued a warning of a potential nuclear missile attack against the Danish navy forces, if Denmark participates in NATO's missile defense system (Snegovaya 2015: 13).

A new technical possibility of information warfare arose through social media: Russian trolling and bots. Russian trolls can be persons that try to manipulate to the point of derailment of social media discourse, by spamming them with comments of indecency,

passing on misinformation and pushing pro-Kremlin messages. These differ from Russian bots. Bots are most often computer programs that send short mass messages containing short content to different social media platforms. Again, the aim is to distort and generate doubt, and nervousness in the information realm (Snegovaya 2015: 14).

Another change to Soviet times has been the more aggressive rhetoric especially of news anchors within Russia. While the Soviet Union news rhetoric would emphasize the “peace-loving nature” of its political system, 21st century news and TV hosts don’t hesitate to say things like, “turn America into a radioactive ash”, indicating the prospect of Russia deploying tanks to Poland or to “burn the hearts of gays”. This would not have been the style of Soviet propaganda or news (Snegovaya 2015: 15).

Centrally to both hybrid and information warfare, actual goals are not to be admitted. This makes it more difficult to understand the goals of actions (Snegovaya 2015: 16).

2.3.1.2. *The Internet and Information War – A Historic Perspective*

As already stated, with the introduction of the internet to the masses, a new chapter in information war has begun. It was about recognizing the potential of its hyperconnectivity generated through the internet, which further had implications for information-technical as well as information-psychological effects of information war that target audiences previously more difficult to reach. The information environment and networks of a state were bound by paper newspapers, radio networks and TV stations, which of course each had their technological and legal boundaries. This changed incrementally with the societal uptake of the internet, not only in regard to communication, but in regard of social media and collecting political information. This translated to the potential of mass audiences being reached with more impact than before, simultaneously needing less monetary expenditure compared to former techniques of disseminating dis-, mis- and malinformation.

In military terms, the internet or better said the transmission of information has become another weapon. As Russian military analyst Vladimir Mukhin (2016) stated:

“Information has become the same kind of weapon as a missile, a bomb and so on [but it] allows you to use a very small amount of matter or energy to begin, monitor and control processes whose matter and energy parameters are many orders of magnitude larger.”

At the initial time in question, we are talking of the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia was actually very weak in regard to information war. This was exemplified by the first Russian-Chechen war at a time, when the media environment was at the initial stages of internet globalization and expansion. The first Russian-Chechen war took place from 1994 to 1996, the second from 1999 to 2009. Russia’s activity in information realm was even called out as “the quintessence of helplessness in the information sphere” by then Russian Defence Minister Sergey Ivanov in 2003 (Ivanov 2003, cited in Giles 2016: 35).

The reasons for not grasping information war techniques in an effective manner occurred because the previously functioning disinformation, malicious influence and subversion networks from the Soviet Union were not there anymore. Furthermore, the potential of the internet was not yet utilized in a timely way (Giles 2016: 35).

The armed conflict of August 2008 between Russia and Georgia brought a key stepping stone to upping the information war efforts of Russia together with the entire Russian military. At this stage Russia decided to augment its efforts significantly in order to close its grip on the

internet with the aim of also controlling information in the digital realm. Concerning how to approach the control of the internet, in the context of open debate, there were calls to create so-called Information Troops, a form of military branch that would tackle the information war. These Information Troops would also include “hackers, journalists, specialists in strategic communications and psychological operations” (Giles 2016: 36). Furthermore, linguists were included in this effort in order to overcome the language barrier and Russia invested heavily in foreign language capacities with the aim of non-Russian speaking audiences (Giles 2011; Giles 2016: 35).

2.3.1.3. Perceived threat in information realm

Russia early on has not only waged information war, but also very much felt threatened by the new information circumstances made possible through the internet. This perceived threat has been taken very seriously, so much so, it is characterized as existential. Its main fear is directed at the West, which it sees developing “information confrontation campaigns”, which aim to undermine Russian sovereignty and ultimately working towards regime change (Giles 2016: 36).

Russia has a distinct perspective on information as such. It is disinclined to approach the field of digital and electronic forms of communication and media any different from other forms of processing of information. Information is seen as a field in itself. Again, traditions from the Soviet KGB loom here, which had the approach of controlling and restricting information flow in society and beyond. The threat both for the Soviet KGB as well as for its successors in today’s Russia has been and is the free reproduction and flow of (online) information. Hence, the invention of the photocopier was perceived just as much of a threat at the time of its inception (Giles 2016: 36).

Henceforth, there was a pronounced opposition towards adopting the internet. This went so far, that in Russian parliament in 1996, in the context of hearings with the title “Russia and the Internet: The Choice of a Future”, the internet as such was called out as a national security threat for the Russian Federation (State Duma 1996; Soldatov 1999; cit. in Giles 2016).

The wisdom behind this threat perception on Russia’s behalf has its historical rationale. The declaration of glasnost by Mikhail Gorbachev and the newly discovered freedom of speech and expression rippled through the Soviet Union and introduced the demise of the Soviet system and state. Liberal freedom has been equated with a direct threat to Russian statecraft (Giles 2016: 37).

Contrasting the Western Liberal democratic world to today’s Russia and similar states, one can denote diverging philosophies regarding the cyberspace. The West has tended to an ungoverned, uncontrolled, or free information stream in the internet and cyberspace – with relatively little legal intervention with a notable exception of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and more recently the Digital Services Act (Directorate-Generale for Communication 2022). However, the other side, Russia and similar states, have a concern regarding free information flow and follows a philosophy of national sovereignty in the internet and cyberspace (Giles 2016: 38).

An illustrating example is the use of the SORM system in Russia for monitoring the online activities of private citizens. Instead of being applied as a secret program, it is a publicly acknowledged aspect of the use of the internet. Interestingly, it has been embraced without apparent real protest, or scrutiny by the majority of internet users since its beginning. The Russian government seems to be bound in a form of confirmation bias of non-related novel developments, where they suspect hostile campaigns financed by the West. Public expressions of protest and dissent in Russia – as was the case of the protests over Duma election results in December 2011 - are viewed by Russian authorities as caused by information war campaigns provoked by the the USA (Giles 2016: 39).

Other examples of confirmation bias of the Russian authorities include the Netflix streaming service. Vladimir Medinsky, the minister of culture in Russia, stated in 2016 that Netflix is run by the United States in order to enter the minds of every person on the planet (cited in Giles 2016: 40).

Pokemon Go, a virtual reality game, also was characterized as a tool of information war by the Russian officials. The minister of communication and mass media, Nikolay Nikirofov felt that this game is supposed to support secret services in collecting video material within Russia and beyond (Giles 2016: 40).

Confirming the Russian suspicion (or confirmation bias) that the United States has attempted to topple regimes that are not to the liking of American interests, the Arab Spring was viewed as another (successful) example of information war/campaigns run by the USA. The President of the Russian Academy of Military Sciences, Army Gen Makhmut Gareyev, attributes the upheaval in the Middle East and North Africa in early 2011 to what he characterizes as "destabilizing information technologies from the Western world"(cited in Giles 2011: 4).

Russia has perceived various threats generated through information campaigns that in their view have been orchestrated by the West. Their aim in Russian perspective has been the toppling of the current government and a regime change according to their values (Giles 2016).

2.3.1.4. How Does The Media Fit into Information War?

RT and Sputnik news are frequently mentioned in the discourse around Russian info campaigns through mass media. Both RT and Sputnik, however, are considered the peak of the ice berg, due to their high visibility (at least before the war started). They are only two media outlets among a rather wide spectrum of outlets, some concealing their intent, others more open about it. However, it is not clear how much exist. The outlets tailor their messages and news to targeted reader and viewer groups. Depending on the forum they approach, they also use a variety of reporting strategies. The range goes from sophisticated lines of arguments, to half-truths, down to simple lies and inventions (Giles 2016: 46-47).

Even the components of Russian information campaigns that are evident and visible to audiences in a specific language constitute just a fraction of a comprehensive multilingual effort. This effort encompasses not only state-sponsored media or trolling but also deceptive media, represented by sock puppet websites designed to mimic legitimate news sources. These websites disseminate fabricated or provocative content that aligns with Russian narratives and are used as sources of larger media outlets like RT or Sputnik News (Giles 2016: 47). Placing disinformation like this and spreading them from one news outlet to another has been a cheaper way of conducting an information campaign than before the times of the internet, which would have needed print newspapers.

In a comprehensive analysis of information dominance featured in a reputable Russian military publication, the primary tenets of media campaigns are outlined as follows:

“The primary methods of manipulating information used by the mass media in the interests of information-psychological confrontation objectives are:

- *Direct lies for the purpose of disinformation both of the domestic population and foreign societies;*
- *Concealing critically important information;*
- *Burying valuable information in a mass of information dross;*
- *Simplification, confirmation and repetition (inculcation);*
- *Terminological substitution: use of concepts and terms whose meaning is unclear or has undergone qualitative change, which makes it harder to form a true picture of events;*
- *Introducing taboos on specific forms of information or categories of news;*

- *Image recognition: known politicians or celebrities can take part in political actions to order, thus exerting influence on the world view of their followers;*
- *Providing negative information, which is more readily accepted by the audience than positive”(Kuleshov et al. 2014; cited in Giles 2016: 47).*

Information war through media is considered to be linked to the broader scope of information war. Regarding the strategic, if not malign, influence of mass consciousness in foreign targeted societies, the buck does not stop at media. The range of aiming to influence public opinion also includes trying to influence the opinion of specific notable individuals, such as important figures in think-tanks, security experts, scholars and researchers as well as some journalists. Even political leaders and decision-makers in democratic institutions are targeted (Giles 2016: 48). Links between Russia and European politicians have been investigated for both right and left wing (Political Capital 2014; Braghiroli & Makarychev 2016). The noted elements of information war transcend into the broader attempt to weaken the “enemy” on all possible levels in order to reduce any capability of fighting. This entails weakening scientific, technical, moral, demographic, culturological, political and economic potentials of a given nation. The aspect of culturological war addresses coercive or manipulative actions regarding all things cultural, such as education, national language, art, pastoral care and religion, science as well as “traditional ways of life” (Kvachkov, cited in Giles 2016: 49). The target (which is also shared by other authoritarian global players, such as ISIS) is located at weaknesses of liberal western democracies (Giles 2016: 49).

2.3.2. Strategic and Weaponized Narratives

Today, it is undebated, that Russia has been engaging in so-called information warfare through spreading hostile or strategic narratives in order to influence domestic or foreign populations for Russian interests (Vihmand-Veebel 2022: 110).

The so-called information revolution has had implications for international security, especially in regard to how novel technologies can be utilized against other countries (cp. Bennett & Livingston 2018; Walker 2016), categorizing this as sharp power (Walker 2016). This utilization of information against other countries has been observed as a general development for semi-authoritarian and authoritarian states (cp Deverell et al. 2020: 15).

In order to understand the issue of weaponization of information, it is necessary to introduce the concept of strategic narrative. Miskimmon et al (2013: 2) define it as follows:

“Strategic narratives are a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors. Strategic narratives are a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate.”

Deconstructing a narrative, Miskimmon et al. (2013: 5) also draw on Kenneth Burke and his work “Grammar of Motives”(1969), that delineates the different elements of a narrative, being “an actor, an action, a goal or intention, a scene, and an instrument” (ibid). Continuing the explanation, narratives are “frameworks that allow humans to connect apparently unconnected phenomena around some causal transformation” (ibid). They provide a way of connecting meanings to events and in a broader level transforming collective narratives to shared attribution of meaning to individual events (Grigor 2020: 33).

The next question then is, when do narratives become strategic. They become so once behind one there is the intent of nudging and influencing understanding and sense-making (Freedman 2006). Freedman explains that “narratives are designed or nurtured with the intention of structuring the responses of others to developing events. They are strategic because they do not arise spontaneously but are deliberately constructed or reinforced out of the ideas and thoughts that are already current”(Freedman 2006: 22).

Hans Morgenthau noted “in the struggle for existence and power ... what others think about us is as important as what we actually are”(cit. in Miskimmon et al. 2013: 5). In trying to

influence what Morgenthau described, states use information strategically to construct the perception of the country in question towards their own population or to foreign populations. However, strategic narratives can be about understanding a given actor in relation to the international system or narratives on the nation state itself (Miskimmon et al. 2013: 4). Context matters to strategic narratives, because any narrative cannot be created at any time. Developing a “great power narrative” for example is dependent on goals of the political leadership, communicative environment and domestic as well as international political context (Miskimmon et al. 2013: 5).

Another formulation is that of Andriy Tyushka (2022: 119) who states “*a narrative is seen as a story, or a set of related stories, normally with a beginning, a middle and an end. The story can mobilize and embody power but can also become a weapon. In the digital age-enabled instant, large-scale and serialized storytelling, the story (especially in the form of ‘fake news’) can also be a weapon of mass distraction (a new ‘WMD’), or destruction-by distraction*“. In contemporary conflicts, the role of narratives can vary, as Tyushka goes on “*from being a story about the conflict to resembling a clash of stories; from a conflict-shaping and –enabling environment to the battlefield per se; from forming a power base to rendering a disempowering weapon. The same applies to strategically deceptive and essentially fake stories-based narratives*” (Tyushka 2022: 119).

Strategic narratives have close conceptual neighbours, which need to be addressed in order to reach more theoretical clarity. Grigor (2020: 33-37) has distinguished strategic narrative from discourse, framing, soft power and propaganda, which will be used as an inspiration for the subsequent comparisons.

2.3.2.1. Difference of discourse and strategic narrative

While discourse represents the entirety of practices and meanings established following the rules on what is accepted as values, knowledge and norms in society (Foucault 1972), the strategic narrative does not represent this entirety of discourse, but is a “communicative tool that political elites intentionally deploy” (Grigor 2020: 33) in order to influence behavior of foreign and national actors by constructing a common meaning of political processes and events (Miskimmon & O’Loughlin 2017).

2.3.2.2. Difference of framing and strategic narrative

Chong & Druckman (2007: 104) define framing as “the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue”. In media studies, frames are understood as ‘interpretative packages’ which connect meanings to events or issues (Gamson & Modigliani 1989).

Hence, with strategic narratives it has in common that it offers the function of connecting meaning to an event, process or the like. Frames do not provide an explanation of a temporal and causal transformation, which strategic narratives do (Miskimmon et al. 2013; Grigor 2020: 34). The strategic narrative links the various elements, i.e. actors, issues, contexts, possible futures, factors, to a causal relationship (Grigor 2020: 34). Grigor goes as far as understanding strategic narratives as “a set of media frames undertaken to reinforce, subvert, undermine, overwhelm or replace a pre-existing discourse on a subject significant to both the audience and the ‘speaker’ that is often a political elite”(Grigor 2020: 35).

2.3.2.3. Difference of soft power and strategic narrative

Soft power refers to the concept developed by Joseph Nye (1990) as power exerted without means of military or economic nature. This power is ‘the ability to shape what others want’ without coercion (Nye 2004), through the ability of a country to attract others, the attraction is directed towards what the attracting country wants (Fan 2008). The presentation of values and policies of a country can occur in a manner that appears attractive and/or legitimate to others. This directly relates to soft power enhancement. Strategic narratives can be subsumed under the concept of soft power as an instrument among others to enhance soft power.

2.3.2.4. Difference of propaganda and strategic narrative

Propaganda can be defined as a “persuasive instrument to move audiences with a pre-established intent to bolster the interest and values of a sender” (Grigor 2020: 36; Arthos 2013). Propaganda is considered to be only a top-down intentional delivery of messages directed towards society with the aim of rendering people to act as wished by the message source (Parry-Giles 2002: xvii; Grigor 2020). This characteristic is a point of difference between a strategic narrative and propaganda. Strategic narratives are understood as being based in societal values and norms, hence by definition enjoying a certain amount of resonating among target audiences. They are constructed in such a way that they culturally have a base at the beginning. Propaganda does not have this as a constitutive element. Furthermore, a strategic narrative has broader encompassing story with a temporal cause-and-effect explanation. Propaganda does not have to be this broad. Dimitriu and De Graaf (2016: 6) directly address the difference between propaganda and strategic narrative by stating that strategic narratives are “much more than a PR-trick to ‘sell a war’ or a mere tool for communication specialists”, however they analyse strategic narratives in the specific context of war. Further narrowing down the difference (again in the context of war), while propaganda can be about labelling policy strategies in a conflictual context, strategic narratives “develop in an osmotic relationship” (Dimitriu & De Graaf 2016: 6) to political preferences, their execution and the roll-out of further action in the context of conflict.

Furthermore, propaganda is viewed differently in the West and in the (former) Soviet Union. In the West it has been equated with behavioral modification, concealment, emotional exploitation as well as fallacy and manipulation (Jowett & O’Donnell 2012; Grigor 2020). In the Soviet Union propaganda even had a positive connotation, rooted in the aspect of political education of the population (Grigor 2020: 36).

2.3.2.5. Different levels of strategic narratives

Strategic narratives can also be understood at three distinct levels (Miskimmon et al 2013).

The first level is the so-called “**International System Narratives**” which depicts how the world is ordered, which actors are of relevance and the workings of the entirety. They are also known merely as “System” narratives (Miskimmon et al. 2018: 4).

Examples of this specific narrative level have been the Cold War narrative, the War on Terror narrative, or the rise of China. The War on Terror narrative describes how state actors protect individuals in society from non-state actors, namely terrorists, all under the mantle of security (Roselle et al. 2014: 76).

The so-called “**National Narratives**” address a story of a country or nation and drawing on its goals and values. Examples have been the USA being a nation to democracy and freedom within and abroad; or the USA as a world bully in various areas of the globe (ibid). Here, the history of a nation is connected to a future envisioned for this specific nation, in other words, it is a constructed connection between past and future all with an application of meaning of the past for the future (Berenskoetter 2014). This level is also known as “Identity” narrative, however, the identity narrative is not reduced to the actor “state”, but can also include non-state, sub-state or other formations. Again, “identity” narrative creates a story around the goals, values, character and most importantly around a political actor (Miskimmon et al. 2018: 4).

The third level are the so-called “**Issue Narratives**” which point out the reasons for why a given policy is important and even desirable, in further consequence how this policy will be executed, implemented or attained. Governmental actions are put into a context by the narrative here. This narrative incorporates important actors, what the conflict or issue is, the workings of how the issue will be resolved by the policy and integrates these different elements all into a web of temporal causality. This narrative level falls into other scholarly work on policy legitimacy. Political elites and society both domestically and abroad are interested in receiving explanations for a policy implemented and why this is a good or just policy (cp George 1989).

Overall, a strategic narrative is considered to be more persuasive, when these three elements of narratives (as shown in figure 2), which can be at play simultaneously, are coherent in themselves as well as between each other (Miskimmon et al. 2018: 4).

Figure 2: Three elements of strategic narratives



Source: own design.

Roselle et al. (2014: 78) offer three ways of studying strategic narratives: first, formation; second, projection; third reception. The first aspect looks at the **formation** of strategic narratives by political actors, which analyse (depending on which level of narrative is used) how political pressures are manifested in policy narratives, how political actors are constrained in their constructed spectrum of possibilities concerning International System Narratives or national narratives. This can be operationalized through process tracing, interviews, text analysis.

The second method – **projection** - delineates how narratives move within the media ecology, how narrative elements are contested and all processes associated with projecting narratives. Possible assessment methods are text analysis, content studies, network analysis, among others.

Third, **reception** is a more traditional element embedded in the political communication literature, and essentially is interested in how people understand and rationally absorb narratives. Methods here can be the focus groups or Q-methodology (Roselle et al. 2014: 78).

This thesis works on the level of projection. How RT generates strategic narratives concerning all three narrative levels (international system, national, issue narratives) is relevant here.

However, there is a specific form of strategic narrative, which is called “weaponized narrative” that is characterized by “warfare in the information environment – using words and images rather than bombs and bullets”, the victims being truth, reason and reflection (Allenby & Garreau 2017: 14). Putting the term in closer relation to the afore discussed strategic narratives, Tyushka argues that the particularity of a weaponized narrative is that the strategic narrative is found in contexts of hostility, confrontation and therefor used in campaigns of offense, counter-offense and deterrence (Tyushka 2022: 120). Hence weaponized narratives are “information warfare”, or “hybrid warfare”. In the words of Tyushka:

“Narrative weaponization is thus defined here as a political and military strategy of (dis)information and psychological operations that create or exploit the adversary’s vulnerabilities to cognitive influence (hacking or attacking) in pursuit of hostile (para-)military and political subversion campaigns, including first and foremost discursive subversion. Seen from that angle, the narrative weaponization strategy entails distinct narrational contestation (counter-narratives), narrational offensive or counter-offensive campaigns as well as, in extreme cases, discursive subversion and character assassination” (Tyushka 2022: 120).

The information warfare waged by Russia against the West goes hand in hand with an International System narrative.

This can be seen in the example of May 2014 at the Moscow Conference on International Security (MCIS), which was hosted by the Russian Ministry of Defence. Here, the foreign minister Sergei Lavrov as well as the defence minister Sergei Shoigu contended that Western governments are trying to remove independent national governments through the so-called coloured revolutions (pro-democracy demonstrations), e.g. in Ukraine or in Belarus, in order to implement governments that are controlled by the “West”. Ultimately, in their opinion these demonstrations have been an attempt to force foreign values on governments that do not abide the American-centered global hegemony. Also Russia is seen to be a target of these perceived attempts (Gorenburg 2014).

The concern of the post-soviet Russian government with information warfare and narratives predates the coloured revolutions. An instance of the Russian vulnerability to information ecology in the face of conflict is shown where Russia did not manage to successfully offer an alternative strategic narrative. This was in the first Russian Chechen war (1994-1996), which developed into a PR disaster for the Russian army, as opinion polls showed that a majority of the Russian population did not support that war (Sieca-Kozłowski 2009). Additionally domestic and foreign media outlets portrayed Chechen war actions as a justified resistance against Russian aggression. This constrained the Russian government in its actions, ultimately contributing to stopping the war (Craik 2019).

Further points of departure into understanding the relation of Russia with issues pertaining to information warfare are official documents. The ‘Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation’ (2000) is a central official document - initiated by Boris Yeltsin and signed by Vladimir Putin (Carman 2002). It was one of the first policy documents presented by Vladimir Putin’s Security Council. This policy document, conceptualized as a security policy document, extends security into the information realm. It justifies exerting control over mass media by the Russian state with the construction of national identity that needs to be protected through a strong state, hence allowing a securitized regulation of the communications infrastructure within Russia. This legitimization of state intervention with the need for national identity reproduction is in itself a discursive/narrative strategy (Carman 2002). Examples of the Russian security concern within this document are “the monopolization of individual sectors or all of the Russian information market by domestic and foreign information entities” as well as ““blocking of activities of state media in providing information to Russian and foreign audiences””(cited in Craik 2019: 10).

Alone this document is the basis for the following scholarly evaluation:

This document, in listing potential external and internal threats, reveals an obsessive concern for foreign intervention, above all from the US and Europe, in the Russian cultural and information industries. Although the danger posed by international terrorist organizations is indeed addressed, the document exaggerates the “misinformation” campaigns orchestrated abroad—which rely on mass media and related NGOs within the federation—against Russia and its policies (Vázquez Liñan 2009: 144).

Another important Russian policy document is the “Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation” from 2013. Information security is asserted again in this document,

namely that Russia “will take necessary measures to ensure national and international information security, [and] prevent political, economic and social threats to the state’s security that emerge in information space”(cited in Craik 2019:10).

Russian information warfare is summarized into three characteristic elements (Craik 2019). First, it attempts to “influence the enemy’s information system and psychic condition” (Weiss & Pomerantsev 2014: 12). Second, the point of this is to “ ‘reduce [an enemy’s] fighting potential’ and to defend oneself from informational attacks” (Galeotti 2014). Third, its impact is so strong that it has the prospect of destabilizing other targeted countries (Craik 2019:11). The actual impact or effect of Russian information warfare in the context of Europe is mentioned by Craik (2019: 11-12) as the following three points:

“If we limit ourselves to Russian offensive capabilities in the European context these claims [referring to the three characteristic elements of Russian information warfare, E.S.] can be spelled out in the following way. Russian use of IW [information warfare, E.S.] will

(1) influence European information systems and the psychic condition of Europeans in such a way that doing so promotes the development of a multi-polar global system.

(2) They will deploy IW in order to reduce Europe’s threat to Russia, namely, by the spread of their values and colour-style revolutions.

And (3) their tactics are believed to be powerful enough to destabilize the EU and/or individual European countries.”

2.3.3. Soft Power, Hard Power, Sharp Power

Given that the end point of strategic or weaponized narratives is successfully influencing the behavior of others, it is necessary to speak of power. The question that arises when embedding strategic narratives in theory is to look at what type of power is at play. Hard power usually goes hand in hand with some form of coercion (military, economic), and soft power is based on attraction (Nye 1990). Clearly strategic narratives are no military force, but the negation of soft power isn't so clear.

In Russia's 2013 "Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation" there is also an explicit mention of soft power. It addresses among other issues the topic of violations of territorial integrity and condemns "the 'unlawful use of "soft power"' to interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign states"(Cadier & Light 2015: 24). Furthermore the concept acknowledges that soft power is important in international relations and wants to invest more into it. It identifies Russian language and culture as a soft power instrument to be further developed. Creating and deepening a positive image of Russia abroad and Russian organisations founded abroad are also a means of soft power mentioned in the concept (Cadier & Light 2015: 23-24).

The concept of soft power was first coined, however not invented, by Harvard scholar Joseph Nye in 1990 (Nye 1990). Soft power is understood in behavioral terms, but doesn't mean that it is any type of behavior. Soft power depends on the minds of the target audiences (Nye 2021: 201). "A given cultural resource such as a Hollywood film may produce attraction in Brazil at the same time it produces repulsion in Saudi Arabia" (ibid). However, soft power has often been ascribed to democratic nations, this isn't necessary, though. Autocratic and anti-liberal actors can also generate soft powers. Osama Bin Laden, for example, did not force or pay the pilots that drove a plane into the World Trade Center towers, moreover, he attracted them with his messages (Nye 2021).

Returning to the question of how to understand strategic narratives, Joseph Nye himself has stated that "strategic communication, propaganda, and information warfare are not new, and sharp power is not soft power though the two terms are sometimes confused with each other since they both focus on the targets' minds."

2.3.3.1. What Is Sharp Power?

The term was introduced in the report of the National Endowment for Democracy's International Forum for Democratic Studies that argued for "sharp" because it "tries to 'pierce, penetrate, or perforate' the political and information environments of targeted countries" (Walker 2016: 12). Sharp power captures the issue of strategic manipulation in the information environment best. An example to demonstrate what sharp power is, has been Russia and its repeated attempts to interfere in foreign democratic elections, in order to undermine trust in democratic institutions. Besides undermining trust or perceived integrity of democratic institutions, other elements of sharp power contain censorship at home and abroad. The aim is to distort the political landscape and curtail free expression. Misleadingly, soft power has been often misused to capture all forms of power that do not fall under hard power.

Another term that captures strategic narratives is information power, which is defined by Schafer as "to describe the narrative power enabled by cyberspace to include social media" (Schafer 2020). This definition adds to the sharp power understanding that the medium of power interplay is digital, "the cyberspace".

2.3.4. Postmodernism

Postmodernism is introduced here, because it is a philosophical tradition that has tried to explain meta-developments that are also at play in Russia's information warfare.

Postmodernist theory to a great extent is related to the "maintenance of a skeptical attitude"(Butler 2002: 13).

The postmodern philosopher Jean-François Lyotard attacks two main narratives that have been central to enlightened Western society. First, he challenges the progressive emancipation of mankind spanning from Christian redemption to communist utopia. Second he challenges the narrative of the triumph of science. Since the Second World War, his arguments go, these doctrines have lost credibility (Butler 2002: 13). In his own words, "simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives"(Lyotard 1984: xxiv).

The mentioned meta-narratives historically functioned as legitimizing certain cultural practices or even giving them authority. The overwhelming power that meta-narratives exert on individuals is demonstrated by the fact that humans are still "willing to kill one another in the name of grand narratives every day – think of the fatwa against Salman Rushdie" (Butler 2002: 14).

A "deconstructive" attitude spans postmodern thinkers/philosophers. An important element of deconstruction is relativism, which challenges the notion of absolute truth. Moreover, truth "is always relative to the differing standpoints and predisposing intellectual framework of the judging subject"(Butler 2002: 16). This is strengthened by their argument that denies that final definitions are at all possible given that even plausible examples will be further formed by an additional defining move that is achieved through language (Butler 2002: 17).

This points to the very fundamental challenge that Derrida and his adherents have presented, namely that the relationship between language and the world isn't reliable, namely as the mirror of nature. Ultimately, this philosophical tradition is pressed to demonstrate that the originally acknowledged relationship between language and the world, will be misleading.

Historically, Lyotard can be embedded in a broader philosophical debate on the "status of knowledge" and the radical questioning of reason, which was primarily led in the French speaking discourse on the issue of the 1968-generation. French and German discourse was characterized by different approaches and traditions, which contributed to the specific French origins of this discourse (Melchior 1992).

Craik (2019) argues that today's Russia has introduced a form of applied postmodernism or "weaponized postmodernism", which is closely tied to its information warfare. She maps two central aims of Russia in information warfare. First, it promotes epistemic insecurity in targeted audiences. This is ideally connected to severing bonds of trust.

Second, it presents alternative or "anti-hegemonic" perspectives which are in line with Russian foreign policy. The difference between applied postmodernism and propaganda is that while propaganda promotes one "truth", applied postmodernism aims at generating a perspective of the world where truth is considered relative (Craik 2019: 13).

The generalized skeptical attitude that is so characteristic of postmodernism is what Russia attempts to implant in European minds (ibid).

The next question, however, is how epistemic insecurity benefits the Putin regime. Craik answers this as follows:

"[It] benefits the Putin regime in at least two ways, one tactical and one strategic. In the short term, the spread of confusion allows the regime to diminish or counter negative coverage of its actions. In the long term, however, it works to undermine the perceived objectivity of Western positions and values, turning them into just one among a number of self-interested positions in a swarm of competing narratives. This serves to undermine the perceived legitimacy of Western criticisms of Russia, neutralising what it fears most, the spread of Western values and practices and a colour style revolution at home." (Craik 2019: 19)

The grand narratives - triumph of science and those of emancipation - have declined and led micro-narratives to proliferate. The "discursive formations" Foucault's inquiries are directed at, show that shifts in discourse, what people talk about and what is even considered as serious, has historically been subject to change. Today, at least in some groups there has been a rise in respectability of so-called "subjugated knowledges", or alternative knowledges, which would have been disqualified by the grand narratives as insufficiently serious or adequate (Foucault 1980; Rouse 2005). One prominent related phenomenon is the rise of conspiracy theories gaining more belief in society. The erosion of trust in the media has been shown to be related to proliferating conspiracy theories. Due to the growth in the last decades in conspiracy belief in mainstream society, also strengthened by the Covid pandemia, scholars already speak of "conspiracy culture" (Aupers 2012).

2.3.5. Knowledge Democracy

Knowledge democracy can be characterized as a society in which knowledge of various actors (whether dominant or not) are drawn on to address societal problems (Bunders et al. 2010: 125). It is a concept of normative nature and summarizes various phenomena (Veld 2010: 12). It sheds light on relationships of knowledge production and the use of knowledge in the contextual framework of a democracy. The interaction between citizens as voters to public authorities through representative democratic processes is of relevance here. What public authorities do is contingent on the will and decision of the citizens as people. Agenda-setting in democracy is a crucial element in the political process. Agenda-setting is the first point of departure in the policy cycle and is considered to be linked to objectives of actors, such as politicians. Another important player in agenda-setting is the media (ibid: 16). Both media and science produce knowledge. Media currently is subject to change due to the encompassing digitalization of media (Goede 2010: 112).

Media is interconnected with democratic decision making as media addresses and frames issues in the political debate (Goede 2010: 116). More and more, in cyberdemocracy the user also (co-)creates content in the political debate, as the comment section in online newspapers or generally as social media demonstrates (ibid). Kevin Philips coined the concept mediocracy in 1975 in his book “Mediocracy: American Parties and Politics in the Communication Age”. He argues that the media indirectly rule democratic society because in this system politicians look for issues to debate in the media, hence stop thinking by themselves. Indirectly, the corporations that own the media influence what is put on the agenda, he argues (cited in Goede 2010: 116). The functions of the media are to inform citizens, frame issues that trouble society, criticize developments and also give citizens a voice. Additionally, they are gatekeepers that allow certain issues into public discourse while keeping out others. Media can also educate and entertain, if enough financial means are given (Goede 2010: 115). Many citizens are dissatisfied with the situation posed by the media, in which genuine dialogue between media and the people does not seem to be possible. Furthermore, it seems that the triangular relationship between politics, the media and corporations cannot really be changed by citizens (Goede 2010: 117).

2.4. Methods

In this chapter, three methods are presented: Qualitative content analysis, media bias rating on a scale and measuring agenda-setting through analyzing the relative frequency of topics.

2.4.1. Qualitative Content Analysis

2.4.1.1. Content analysis

The term of content analysis is difficult to define per se, as it aims to examine various forms of communication. There are varying understandings and definitions of content analysis.

Berelson considers it as a technique for describing manifest content of communication in a systematic and objective manner (cited in Mayring 2010: 11-12). Mayring, who coined the qualitative content analysis, considers a central tenet of content analysis is to capture communication. This communication is generated in differing forms such as sound, text or other forms. Communication is fixated through its means of transportation, such as texts and sound files (Mayring 2010: 12)

How does qualitative content analysis distinguish itself from other forms of communication analysis?

The method of qualitative content analysis coined by Mayring is considered to combine various techniques in order to systematically analyze text (Mayring 2004). It is characterized by a systematic approach that distinguishes itself from other methods. Because of that, the approach becomes comprehensible and verifiable. Furthermore, an analysis in this approach should not merely reproduce the text under scrutiny. Moreover, it should allow for the application of a theory-deduced treatment of a research question and empirical material to be analyzed along theoretical perspectives and aspects (Mayring 2010: 12-13).

Content analysis attempts to

- “analyse communication,
 - analyse fixated communication
 - and approach this in a systematic, rule-based and theory-driven manner
 - with the aim of creating conclusions about specified aspects of the communication”
- (Mayring 2010: 13).

Mayring considers the approach of qualitative content analysis to be better described by the term of a “category-led text analysis” (Mayring 2010: 13).

2.4.1.2. Types of content analysis

Techniques of content analysis are frequency analyses, as well as valence analysis, intensity analysis and contingency analysis (Mayring 2010: 13).

Frequency analysis is considered as one of the most straightforward approaches. It counts specific elements within a chosen material, how frequent they appear and compares the frequency of the counted aspects/elements. The approach works with a comprehensive set of categories that aims to capture all aspects of a chosen source (Mayring 2010: 13).

The second group is called valence and intensity analyses. This is a content analysis approach that scales text elements in an evaluation scale. An example of this is the analysis of opinion articles of newspapers and how far they represent the position of the government compared to the position of the opposition. This approach needs the analyzing person to make evaluations based on the scale. There aren't always specific rules to this evaluation on a scale (Mayring 2010: 16).

The third group of content analysis is called contingency analyses (“Kontingenzanalyse”). The aim of this approach is to evaluate whether certain text elements appear in context with one another and how they are linked (contingent). A structure of linked elements can be scrutinized for closer understanding of the material. Various discourse analyses and the classic contingency analysis of Osgood fall in this group (Mayring 2010: 16).

2.4.1.3. Techniques of the qualitative content analysis by Mayring

Qualitative content analysis should not be seen as the alternative to quantitative content analysis. Moreover, it can be understood as a method for systematic interpretation, which draws on qualitative components and systematizes the overall approach by breaking it down into analytical steps and guiding rules. This “approach of interpretation” allows for embedding quantitative elements as well. The latter receive a novel meaning in the context of qualitative content analysis compared to a solely quantitative approach (Mayring 2010: 50).

In the following, central tenets of the qualitative content analysis technique are presented:

- *Embedding the material in the communication context*

An important benefit of this approach compared to other text analytical approaches is that it upholds a communication scientific rooting. The material is considered in its communicational context. The interpreter must look at the specific part of communicative processes which are scrutinized. Content will always be understood within the context of the broader field of which the communication material is extracted. The genesis and effect of the scrutinized material are also taken into consideration (Mayring 2010: 50).

- *Systematic and rule-based approach*

Systematic in this approach means to be able to orient oneself by pre-defined rules of text analysis. The approach is characterized by singling out a concrete model of how the analysis shall occur. However, qualitative content analysis is no one-size-fits-all instrument. It is adapted to the specific research question. Each step of the evaluation should be retrievable to a rule. Another characteristic of this procedure is that the content is disaggregated.

For the content analysis it is important to define the units of analysis, which are the coding units, the context unit and the unit of evaluation. This means that the researcher needs to decide how to approach the material, which parts are to be scrutinized, which parts are to be evaluated in which succession. However, in an inductive category-formation process it makes sense to keep these points very open. Also in the inductive process, material will be dissected into smaller parts.

Nevertheless, also the open inductive process needs to be determined by rules and approached in such a way that it can be comprehended by other content analysts (Mayring 2010: 50).

- *Categories*

Categories are considered an essential part of qualitative content analysis. The aims of the analysis can be made concrete in terms of categories. The system of categories is considered the central analytical instrument. Again, this method allows others to understand the approach intersubjectively. It allows for comparability of the results and reliability of the analysis (Mayring 2010: 51).

- *Object reference comes first*

The qualitative content analysis should not be a mere technique. The relation to the object under scrutiny, the research object, is important. This means that the procedure is oriented to the day-to-day practice with linguistic material. Basic procedures are called summarization, explication and structuring. The so-called summarizing content analysis actually works with basic summaries of content. This demonstrates that the research object, the empirical material, is at the center of attention. The research technique should not be applied blindly to the material, but adequately calibrated to the material (Mayring 2010: 51).

- *Theory-driven analysis*

Qualitative content analysis is no fixated technique, but more a set of specifications and decisions over generalized approaches and analytical steps. Technical procedural ambiguities need to be counter-weighted by theoretical arguments and rigor. Theory-drivenness in this point means that already existing research and knowledge about the research object are considered in the techniques applied for content analysis. Again, the research object has priority over procedural arguments (Mayring 2010: 52).

- *Inclusion of quantitative analytical steps*

Qualitative content analysis explicitly encourages the inclusion of quantitative elements within the qualitative content analysis. It must be argued by the researcher which points of the analytical process allow for quantitative steps. Especially in regard to generalizing the results, quantitative procedures are of value. For example, the relevance of a category can be demonstrated by how often it occurs within the material. Also more sophisticated quantitative methods can be applied if the research interest necessitates it (Mayring 2010: 52).

- *Quality criteria*

This point refers to methodical standards of qualitative content analysis, which are addressed more flexibly than in quantitative methods. Because of this, quality criteria are necessary to reflect on the results achieved. Objectivity, reliability and validity are of relevance here. Objectivity is approximated through so-called inter-coder agreements. Several content analysts approach the material independent from each other and compare their results among each other. Inter-coder agreements also address the point of reliability in research. In the case of unreliable results it can be of use to understand how these unreliable results occurred. This can potentially lead to a change of analytical methods. The search for reliability and validity

should accompany the process of analyzing the material within the context of inter-coder agreements (Mayring 2010: 52-53).

Due to the fact, that only the author of this master thesis coded the material, especially this aspect remains a departing point for other researchers to build on the findings of this thesis and potentially re-evaluate them.

- 3 forms of interpretation in qualitative content analysis

There are three distinct forms of techniques of analysis in the qualitative content analysis approach.

- Summarization
- Explication
- Structuration

Summarization aims to reduce the material so far, that only the most relevant contents remain. The abstraction of these elements conveys an overview of the material in a concise way. **Explication** aims to juxtapose contextual material to certain individual text elements that allows for deeper understanding and interpretation of the material. Anchor examples can be used here, that should illustrate the category in question. **Structuration** aims to distill certain aspects from the material, with pre-defined criteria. The result should allow the analyst to be able to evaluate the material according to the chosen criteria. This is a deductive approach, because the category system is developed in relation to theory and the research question. These three forms can also be combined. Thematic analyses are considered a mix of distinct forms of interpretation between deductive and inductive approaches (Mayring 2010: 67).

2.4.2. Method for measuring media bias

Besides approaching the material in qualitative terms, the master thesis also applies a rating scale regarding media bias, as it is considered to be relevant to the research questions.

2.4.2.1. *What is media bias?*

Media outlets are not always objective in their reporting, but are biased in one or another direction. This applies both in the liberal democratic environment as well as in authoritarian regimes. But what is media bias after all? Media bias or distortion occurs when reports do not illustrate real facts objectively and neutrally (Im Winkel 2015).

There are three forms of media bias. The first form is when facts are simply not reflected, meaning there is wrong information in the report. Second, media bias can occur through thematic choice of the reports as media outlets also create agenda setting or at least contribute to it. Media outlets can't decide over how people think about something, but more about which topics and problems attention flows into (Entman 2007). Third, there is a media bias when opinions, arguments are weighed differently and interpreted in a tilt towards an opinion. In this third point certain facts and relationships are especially emphasized, which is intended to lead to framing of an issue or at least activating certain story-lines, interpretation patterns among viewers and readers of the media outlet (Im Winkel 2015: 3).

Media bias is caused by structures of preferences, interests and incentives. Three causes of media bias have been considered. First, the supply side: It is made up of the preferences and positions of news owners, advertisement providers and journalists themselves. Second, the demand side: the preferences of the consumers themselves (Mullainathan & Shleifer 2005). Third, the structurally determined constellation of political and social power are considered as a source of media bias (Herman & Chomsky 2010).

2.4.2.2. Measuring media bias

Ideally, in order to analyze media bias there would be a neutral evaluation standard. This would necessitate finding an agreement over what objective reporting would ultimately entail. Which topics, in what relation to one another, and which opinions and arguments and actors are to be depicted in the overall reporting does not exist and isn't feasible.

Because there is no straight-forward methodology developed for this issue, I decided to approach this in an exploratory way. In her master thesis, Fabrykowska decides to apply a rating procedure that takes policy documents and rates them on a scale in regard to specified dimensions. The rating is only conducted by the author (Fabrykowska 2022: 27-28).

Drawing on the aspect of transforming qualitative data (text) into exploratory quantitative data through scaling, I created a scale for media bias. It spans from 0 to 10, which goes from negative bias to neutral to positive bias. Values between 0 and 4 are negative, between 4 and 6 are neutral and between 6 to 10 are positive bias. The evaluation unit was one article.

The guiding principles of evaluation were inspired by the three forms of media bias mentioned above:

- Wrong facts
- Opinions and arguments of one side are more elaborate and emphasized than other arguments or actors within one article.
- Agenda setting

While wrong facts and one-sidedness can be considered on a unit level of an article, analyzing agenda-setting necessitates taking a broader look at an assembly of articles. Hence, for the rating of one article, the element of agenda setting was discarded. Descriptive statistics on the agenda setting, however, was conducted for each government period in another step. So the first element was about evaluating whether there was a media bias at all.

The second element of evaluation was to decide whether an article contained negative or positive media bias. This is understood in relation to the guiding research question of this master thesis. Here my guiding principle was:

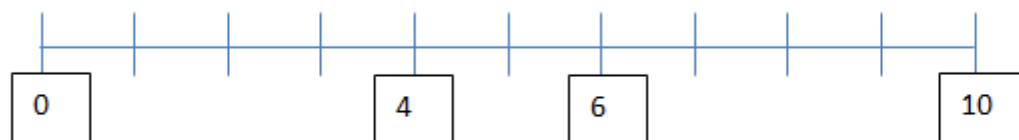
- If there is a media bias, does it defend the subject under scrutiny in its reporting or does it attack it in its reporting?

The two steps were bundled into one scale rating per article. 0 signifies the most negative, 10 the most positive pole. 97 articles were rated individually. In the analysis section the results are visualized in descriptive statistics.

Given that the scale rating was conducted only by myself, the next step (beyond this thesis) would be for other researchers, journalists and experts to evaluate articles of RT with this rating scale. However, this would go beyond the scope of this master thesis.

In figure 3 the scale going from the points 0 to 10 is shown. Each article was rated on one of the 11 points.

Figure 3: Media bias rating scale



Source: own design

Negative reporting is defined as $0 \leq x < 4$

Neutral reporting is defined as $4 \leq x \leq 6$.

Positive reporting is defined as $6 < x \leq 10$

2.4.3. Method for measuring media agenda setting

The process of agenda setting is broad in scope. It includes three components: Policy agenda, the public agenda and the media agenda (Dearing & Rogers 1996: 5). Media agenda is of interest in this master thesis. Lippmann's book on Public Opinion delineates the importance of the media for how people perceive reality around them, as it constructs a form of reality in the minds of people through the information it conveys (Lippmann 1922). Agenda setting is conceived as channeling the direction of attention of the readers and the viewers. Mass media cannot necessarily decide on *how* people will think of a certain issue, but it can contribute to the selection of issues (*what*) people will think about. Mass media does so through their reporting, how much depth certain issues receive. Which issues are considered as important also has to do with this aspect (McComb & Shaw 1972).

In this master thesis, measuring media agenda setting of RT is addressed through counting the relative frequency of topics within each of the phases as well as the overall diversity of topics. The frequency of topics is displayed through tables. The issues were counted manually by the author.

3. Literature Review

In International Relations scholarship, RT has been analysed empirically in different ways. It has been examined under the aspect of information warfare / hybrid warfare (Xie & Boyd-Barrett 2015; Pomerantsev 2015; Ratsiborynska 2016), in light of public diplomacy efforts and nation branding (Yablokov 2015; Miazhevich 2018), the use of conspiracy theories (Yablokov 2015; Yablokov & Chatterje-Doody 2021), the organization of RT (Elswah & Howard 2020), news recipient analysis (Fisher 2020; Crilley 2022; Wagnsson 2023), propaganda strategies (Karpchuk & Yuskiv 2021; Kuznetsova 2023), analyzing RT reporting for issue framing, e.g. for the Black Lives Matter movement (Hutchings 2020; Dajani 2021; Bradshaw et al. 2023; Shestopalova 2023). As well as under the aspect of soft/sharp power, as engaged with in more depth later on.

How reporting has been used by Russian state-sponsored media outlets such as RT or Sputnik has already been researched for individual European countries (Deverell et al. 2020; Rebegea 2019; Wagnsson & Barzanje 2021), for the USA (Ramsay & Robertshaw 2019) or international organisations like NATO or the European Union (Chaban et al. 2017; Ramsay & Robertshaw 2019). For the cases in Europe, research has been done for Sweden and the Nordic countries. Deverell et al. (2020: 16) find that news narratives of Denmark and Sweden have been rougher than those of Finland and Norway, possibly due to special Russian interests in regard to these countries, e.g. in Arctic security. Rebegea (2019) shows how Russia uses media as information war in order to erode the Euro-Atlantic relationship and nudge public opinion. Ramsay and Robertshaw (2019) show among other things how RT and Sputnik news repeatedly show frames of dysfunction concerning reports about Western countries. They looked at USA, UK, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, and Ukraine (the latter as an example of Eastern Europe). Mölder and Sazonov (2020) find that Russian media outlets (among others RT) used the covid pandemic to construct conflictual tensions between Baltic countries and Russia, showing an allegedly russophobic environment. Hansson et al. (2023) show how RT (and Sputnik) construct blame narratives against Western countries in the context of 5G cellular technology discourse. Kragh and Åsberg (2017) write in the case of Sweden that RT news attempts to “sow doubt about the integrity of Sweden’s political system” by using fake news (Kragh & Åsberg 2017: 34). Furthermore, Russian media narratives attempted to influence the Sweden-Nato and the Sweden-EU relationship (ibid).

4. Preliminary Analysis

This chapter incorporates elements that do not display the results of the content analysis per se, but are nevertheless important to the analytical process. It includes the contextual analysis, which describes the communicator RT as an actor; ethical considerations during the entire process; the sampling process; and the concrete process of the mixed methods data analysis.

4.1. Contextual analysis

Given the fact that RT reporting will be analysed, it is first necessary to shortly delineate what or who the news outlet “RT” is .

4.1.1. The Russian News Outlet “RT”

RT, formerly known as Russia Today, is a Russian state-backed news outlet that offers news coverage in English, German, Spanish, French, Arabic and - of course - Russian. It was founded in 2005, and reached notoriety in 2008 during the Russian-Georgian war, during which Russia was considered to have lost the international information war against Georgia, as this war was considered unjust on the Russian side. As of 2009, Russia Today was named “RT”, the brand which has been kept until today. As of 2009, RT has been increasingly considered to have become a tool for influencing public opinion in foreign countries, i.e. outside of Russia (Glazunova et al. 2022: 1-2). Some have called it a tool of Russian state propaganda (National Intelligence Council 2017). RT’s broadcasting and news is considered to reach around 100 million viewers in 47 countries on a weekly basis before the war (RT, n.d.). On Youtube, RT is one of the most watched television channels before being banned in the EU in 2022, with almost 3 billion views, which outnumbers Al Jazeera, which had 1.8 billion views in the English version in 2020 (Elswah & Howard 2020: 623-4)

4.1.2. RT’s Organisation

When RT first started out in 2005, it faced the challenge of competing with global media powerhouses like Al Jazeera, supported by Qatari funds, as it operated with a modest capital basis of 30 million dollars, provided by the Kremlin (Ioffe, 2010). RT had a labor force of 500 professionals stationed at its Moscow headquarters, when it started, among which 200 professionals with journalistic tasks from both Russian and international backgrounds (Alpert, 2014). However, the landscape evolved notably over time. By 2011, the Russian government significantly increased RT's financial resources to over 300 million dollars, making its operations possible, and the news outlet expanded its team to include more than 1,000

members spread across 22 bureaus across the globe (Alpert, 2014; Rutland & Kazantsev, 2016).

An important point in time concerning RT's development occurred in 2013, when President Vladimir Putin enacted a law preventing any reduction in financial resources for state-affiliated news outlets. This included RT. The commitment was then even fortified by the Kremlin's decision to raise RT's budget for the years 2015–2017 to \$400 million (Alpert, 2014). RT does not rely on advertising revenue (as traditional media would), moreover it chooses to allocate its funds towards self-promotion activities. A recent investigation conducted by the Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA) showed that the Russian Federation dedicates \$190 million per year to the global diffusion of the channel through different means. Examples are hotel networks, satellite broadcasting, and cable networks (ICA, 2017).

The bottom line of the contextual analysis is that the news outlet RT is not independent. It is directly connected to the Russian state. The source of the articles is connected to state-interest.

4.2. Ethical considerations

On first of March 2022, soon after the invasion of the Ukraine by the Russian federation during dawn of the 24th of February 2022 and the war that has been ongoing since, the European Union adopted a regulation in line with further sanctions that prohibited the diffusion of Russian dis-, and misinformation as well as propaganda through its state-run news outlets, RT and Sputnik news, within the European Union (European Union 2022). “Russia Today and Sputnik, as well as their subsidiaries, will no longer be able to spread their lies to justify Putin’s war and to sow division in our union. So we are developing tools to ban their toxic and harmful disinformation in Europe”, Ursula Von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, was cited justifying this step (Wintour et al. 2022). RT, which is both a TV station as well as an online news outlet, cannot be received any longer within the European Union. TV and internet access providers had to implement a technical blockage to these Russian news outlets according to national laws of the EU member states. The EU sanction was transformed to Austrian law with an amendment of the so-called “Audiovisuelle Mediendienste-Gesetz”, which stated that the diffusion of programs under EU sanctions will be fined. The law passed with an overwhelming majority in the national assembly (Nationalrat). The populist right party FPÖ voted against it (Fidler 2022).

I was confronted with insecurity about whether it was legal to access the RT news website from Europe and within the EU. I talked about this to my supervisor Professor Dr. David Campbell, who suggested asking the Austrian foreign ministry about this. On the 1st of June 2023, I had an e-mail exchange with Ambassador Dr. Gerhard Sailer, who heads the ministry division concerned with Russia (among other things). He assured me that scientific research on RT is permitted. RT articles would need to be marked as such, which has been done in this master thesis. I omit the technical details on how I entered the RT news site, given that these details could be used for non-research purposes.

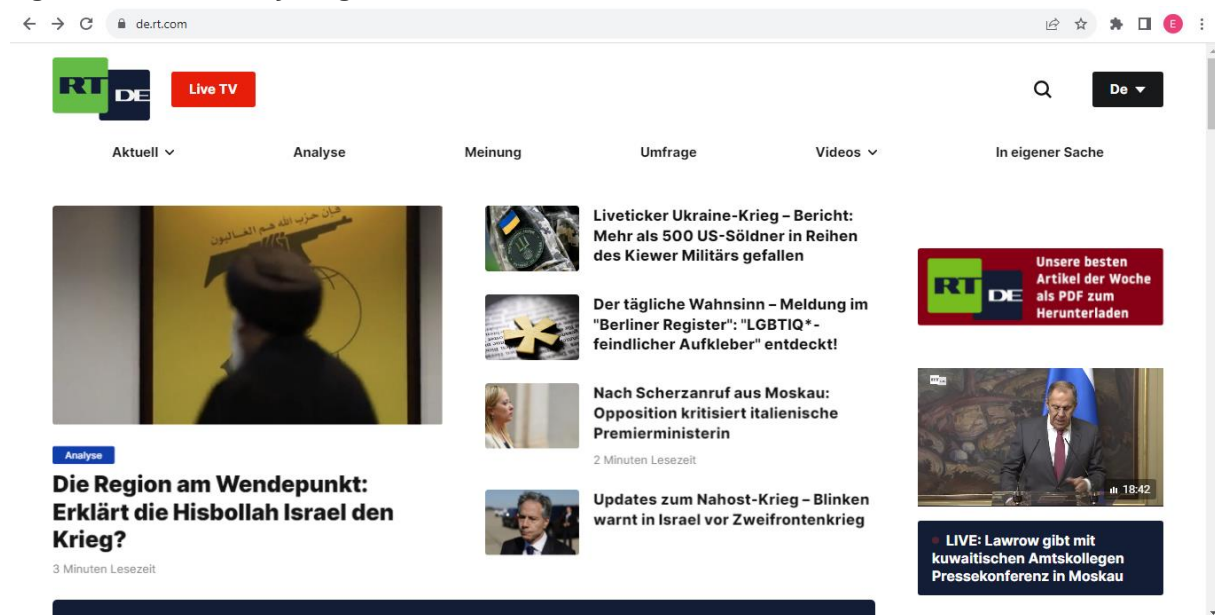
4.3. Determination of Source Material

4.3.1. Data Sampling

The research endeavor of analyzing RT reporting in four different government periods (divided into five different phases of analysis) from 2017 up to 2023 with a mixed methods approach made it impossible to summon all articles of RT concerning Austria. The first measure was to decide which of the various RT channels would be chosen for sampling. I decided to focus only on the German language version of RT, called “RT DE”, the german-speaking version of RT online. This step is intelligible due to the fact that RT news on Austria will be of most interest to those living in Austria, who speak German.

For the actual sampling I entered the website “www.de.rt.com”, which can be seen in the following screenshot of figure 4.

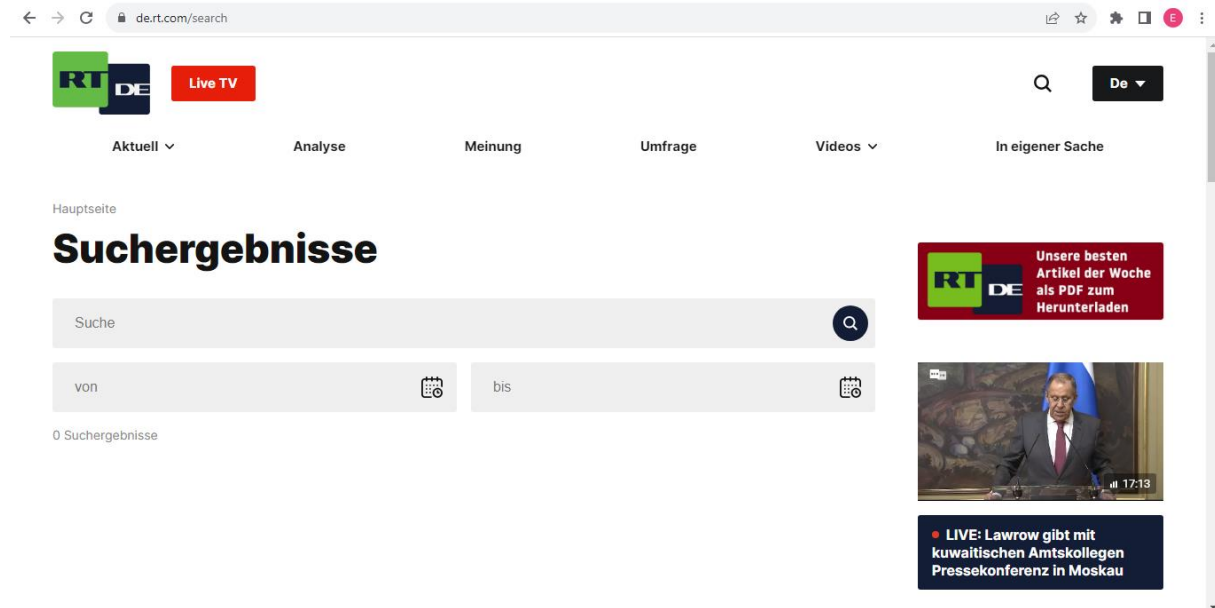
Figure 4: Screenshot of the german RT news site



Source: www.de.rt.com (Screenshot from 4.11.2023)

I subsequently entered the search bar, which looked like the following screenshot in figure 5.

Figure 5: Screenshot of the German news site

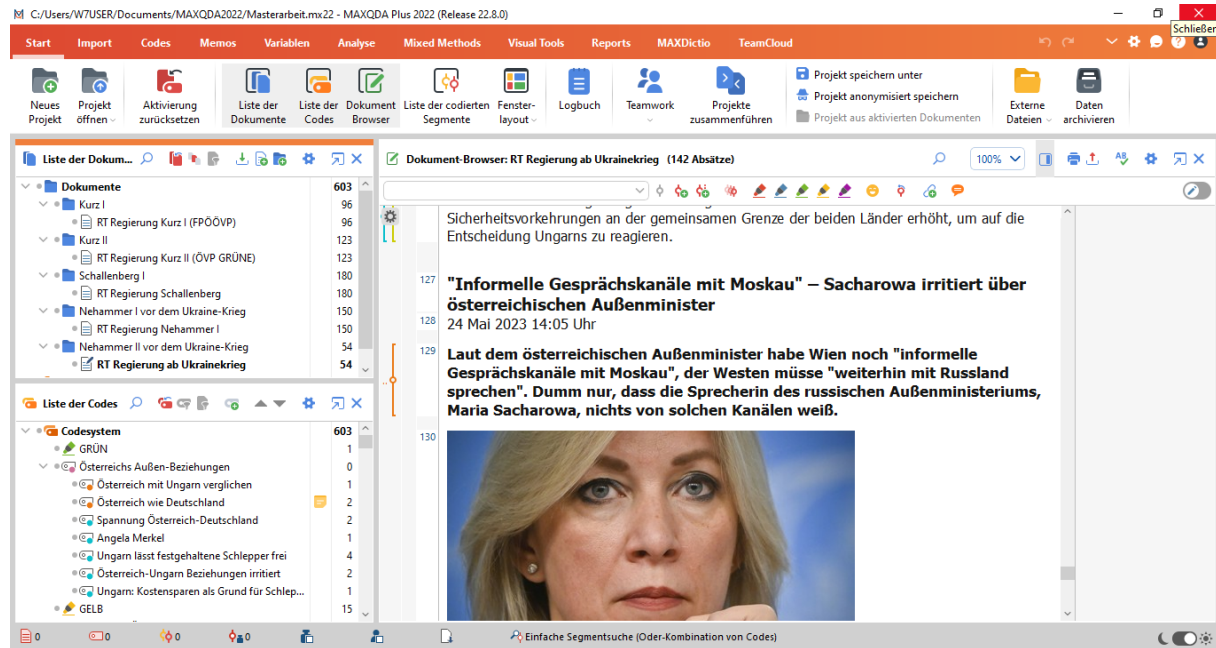


Source: www.de.rt.com (Screenshot from 4.11.2023)

Overall, 97 articles were sampled in the government periods Kurz I, Kurz II, Schallenberg I and Nehammer I before the war and after the start of the war. The articles were sampled, when “Austria” or “Vienna” was in the title of the article. Not all articles of each government period could be sampled due to the sheer number thereof. Hence, I decided to sample the first and the last month of each period of analysis. The idea behind taking articles of the first and the last month is that the Austrian government also might be more in the news due to the change of government.

The articles were then collected from the RT website and copied into one document for each period and transposed to the qualitative content analysis software MAXQDA. In figure 6, the screenshot of the MAXQDA working space is displayed.

Figure 6: Screenshot of the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA



Source: own analysis

The articles that were copied and pasted off the RT website are from the following periods, covering the first and the last month of the government.

- *Kurz I government*: The sampling period spanned: 18th December 2017 to 18th January 2018 and 18th April to 18th May 2019. In total this period included 17 articles.
- *Kurz II government*: The sampling period spanned: 7th January to 7th February 2020 and 11th September to 11th October 2021. In total this period included 18 articles.
- *Schallenberg I government*: The sampling period spanned: 11th October to 6th December 2021 (here the entire government period was sampled because the government of Schallenberg I lasted slightly less than two months). In total this period included 25 articles.
- *Nehammer I government before the Ukraine war*: The sampling period spanned: 6th December 2021 to 6th January 2022 and 24th January until 24th February 2022. In total this period included 28 articles.
- *Nehammer I government after the start of the Ukraine war*: The sampling period spanned: 24th February to 24th March 2022 and 26th April to 26th May 2023. (the last

month was chosen because it was the latest month at the time of the sampling process). In total this period included 9 articles.

The types of articles range from a sort of short news agency articles to longer newspaper style articles as the following two examples show. The figure 7 and the figure 8 show examples of RT articles.

Figure 7: Screenshot of an article in the RT news site.

Hauptseite / Österreich

Michael Linhart wird neuer Außenminister Österreichs

11 Okt. 2021 11:33 Uhr

Der Diplomat Michael Linhart wird am Montag als neuer österreichischer Außenminister verteidigt. Der bisherige Amtsinhaber Alexander Schallenberg (ÖVP) tritt die Nachfolge von Sebastian Kurz als Bundeskanzler an.

Österreichs Botschafter in Frankreich, Michael Linhart, wird neuer Außenminister des EU-Landes. Linhart wurde 1958 in der Türkei geboren, wo sein Vater als Diplomat tätig war. Michael Linhart war unter anderem als österreichischer Botschafter in Damaskus und in Athen tätig, zuletzt in Paris. Außerdem diente er viereinhalb Jahre lang als Generalsekretär im österreichischen Außenministerium. Politische Erfahrung sammelte er unter anderem als Berater des damaligen Kanzlers Wolfgang Schäussel (ÖVP). Linhart ist verheiratet und hat drei Kinder.

Die Personalrochade wurde durch Korruptionsermittlungen gegen Sebastian Kurz ausgelöst, der am Samstag seinen Rücktritt als Bundeskanzler bekanntgab. Enge Mitstreiter von Kurz stehen im Verdacht, eine entgegenkommende Berichterstattung eines Medienunternehmens erkauft zu haben, um Kurz ab dem Jahr 2016 den Weg an die Parteispitze und in das Bundeskanzleramt zu ebnen. Auch Kurz wird als Beschuldigter geführt. Er bleibt jedoch ÖVP-Parteichef und wechselt als Fraktionschef ins Parlament.

Mehr zum Thema - "Nicht das Ende seiner politischen Karriere" – Politikwissenschaftler zum Rücktritt von Kanzler Kurz

(dpa/rt)

Source: www.de.rt.com (4.11.2023)

The above article (figure 7) was published on the RT website on 11 October 2021 and illustrates a short article on RT.

Figure 8: Screenshot of an article in the RT news site.

Hauptseite / International

"Informelle Gesprächskanäle mit Moskau" – Sacharowa irritiert über österreichischen Außenminister

24 Mai 2023 14:05 Uhr

Laut dem österreichischen Außenminister habe Wien noch "informelle Gesprächskanäle mit Moskau", der Westen müsse "weiterhin mit Russland sprechen". Dumm nur, dass die Sprecherin des russischen Außenministeriums, Maria Sacharowa, nichts von solchen Kanälen weiß.

 "Informelle Gesprächskanäle mit Moskau" – Sacharowa irritiert über österreichischen Außenminister

Die Sprecherin des russischen Außenministeriums, Maria Sacharowa, hat sich verwundert über die Aussage des österreichischen Außenministers Alexander Schallenberg (ÖVP) zu "informellen Gesprächskanälen mit Moskau" gezeigt.

 Plötzlich ertönt in einem Zug der Österreichischen Bundesbahnen eine Hitler-Rede

Moskau habe keine Informationen über die angebliche Aufrechterhaltung informeller Kommunikationskanäle mit der österreichischen Regierung, sagte die Sprecherin gestern laut der russischen Nachrichtenagentur TASS.

Plötzlich ertönt in einem Zug der Österreichischen Bundesbahnen eine Hitler-Rede

Schallenberg hatte in einem Interview für *Die Welt* am 22. Mai die Frage bejaht, ob Österreich informelle Gesprächskanäle mit der russischen Regierung unterhalte. Der Minister sagte zudem, das sei wichtig, denn: "Der Westen muss weiterhin mit Russland sprechen." Das tue auch die US-Regierung, so

Schallenberg weiter.

Sacharowa entgegnete jedoch:

"Wir waren überrascht zu erfahren, dass Wien informelle Kommunikationskanäle mit den russischen Behörden unterhält. Wir wissen davon nichts."

Die Außenamtssprecherin merkte zudem an, dass es keine Themen gebe, über die Moskau und Wien einen informellen Dialog führen könnten. Und sie fügte hinzu:

"Österreich, das sich gegenüber Russland eindeutig auf die Seite des Westens in seiner feindlichen Politik gestellt hat, hat seine bisher unabhängige Rolle in der Außenpolitik aufgegeben und das Prinzip der Neutralität über Bord geworfen."

Die Sprecherin kommentierte darüber hinaus eine andere Äußerung Schallenbergs, wonach er im Falle eines persönlichen Treffens mit seinem russischen Amtskollegen Sergei Lawrow wegen der diplomatischen Etikette die Hand "kurz reichen" würde, aber mit Widerwillen. Dazu meinte Sacharowa:

"Was seine emotionale Verzweiflung über die Notwendigkeit des Händeschüttelns mit dem russischen Minister bei einem hypothetisch möglichen persönlichen Treffen mit ihm betrifft, so möchten wir Minister Schallenberg versichern, dass niemand ihn aufsuchen würde, um ihm die Hand zu schütteln."

Mehr zum Thema – "Lassen unsere Soldaten nicht in Ukraine verheizen" – Wiener fordern militärische Neutralität

Source: www.de.rt.com (4.11.2023)

The second text shown above (figure 8) is an example (from 24th May 2023) for one of the articles on RT that is not like a news agency articles, but more like a newspaper article.

4.3.2. The Procedure of Mixed Methods Data Analysis

The articles were analysed following the qualitative content analysis framework of Mayring (Mayring 2015). The approach of content **structuring** analysis was chosen with the aim of distilling certain aspects of the empirical material, or in other words, to extract and summarise certain content elements relevant to the research question. This included both deductive, rule based analysis and inductive approaches. The deductive, rule based aspect of analysis pertained to the research interest, namely which Austrian political actors and policy fields are addressed in the RT reporting. The inductive element, however, was simultaneously involved, as the empirical material was extensively read, the coding process was developed closely to the text basis. The sub-categories of analysis were developed with open coding on the material.

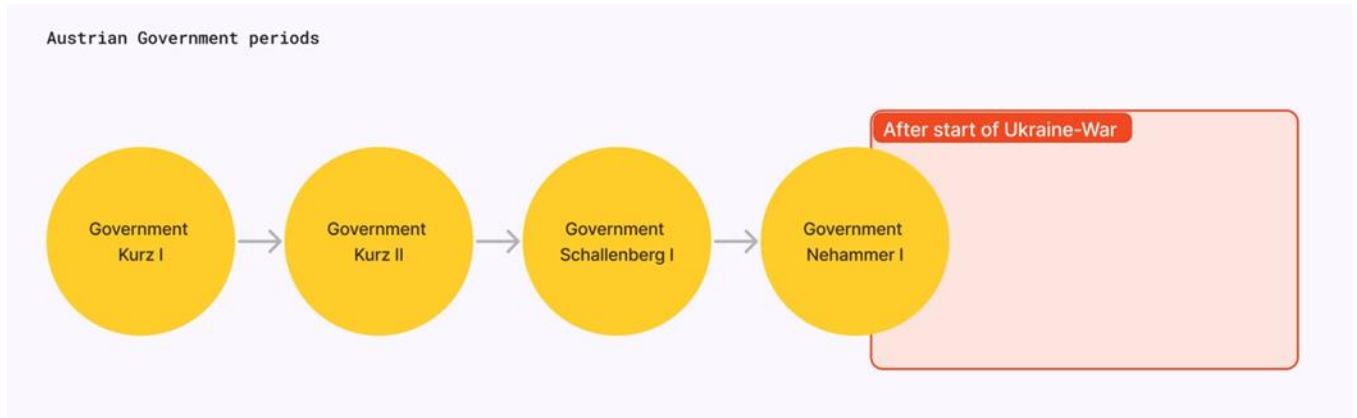
The minimal coding unit was a sentence and the maximum unit was a paragraph. The coding process occurred over the summer of 2023.

The main categories that were developed for political actors in Austria were the following:

- Austrian Government
- Opposition
- Civil Society
- Austrian-Russian Relations

All five periods of analysis were put under scrutiny for the above main categories. The figure 9 visualizes the five periods.

Figure 9: Austrian government periods analysed



Source: own design

Whether reporting could be judged as negative, neutral or positive was the next step after coding the material twice. The rating scale delineated in the method section was applied to the individual articles and percentages of each scale category (negative, neutral or positive media bias) were calculated. The results are presented for each government period in the analysis section.

Simultaneously, I developed a frequency table of topics and relative percentages for each of the five phases/ government periods.

Additionally, I made a table indicating the most frequent topics in all five phases and the relative percentages of the most frequent topics in each of the government periods (see Discussion chapter, Table 6).

After the media bias rating I returned to the coded material to evaluate the actor-specific codes (within the MAXQDA workspace) to gauge, which actors contributed to negative or positive media bias within the RT reporting.

In the analysis section, each period is presented with central political actors, how they were depicted in reporting and which issue(s) they were presented with.

The direct citations in the analyses were translated via “deepl.com” (an online translation software) from German to English, given that the “RT DE” reporting was in German. The translations were then proofread by myself and adapted for full comprehension. At the end of each analysis sub-chapter the hypotheses are discussed based on the media bias rating scale.

5. Analyses of Government Phases

In this chapter, the results of the three applied methods are presented. First, each phase shows the results of the actor-centric coding process, which opens a window into which actors were portrayed in the given phase/government period. The categories were:

- The Austrian Government
- The Opposition
- Civil Society
- Austrian-Russian Relations

Second, the table on topic frequency offers insights into agenda setting within each phase/government period. Third, the media bias analysis shows the percentage of articles in each bias category (negative, neutral, positive) and the average media bias rating based on the explorative media bias rating scale.

The hypotheses are tested for each of the five government periods, as can be seen in the boxes at the end of each sub-chapter.

5.1. Government Kurz I

The government period of Kurz I lasted from 18.December 2017 to 18.Mai 2019. The sampled articles were taken from the first and the last 30 days within this period. In this chapter the structured qualitative content analysis, thematic frequency analysis and media bias analysis are presented.

5.1.1. Qualitative Content Analysis

5.1.1.1. Category: Austrian Government

Sebastian Kurz

The chancellor Sebastian Kurz is given most attention in the sample, which included all RT articles from the first and last month of the government period.

Issues associated with Sebastian Kurz are the so-called “Familienbeihilfe”, which is a family subsidy in the Austrian welfare system. His and the government’s intent was to index the family subsidies, which would have primarily addressed children of foreign workers in Austria, who live in their origin countries, often Hungary, Poland or Romania (RT DE, 5 Jan. 2018).

Sebastian Kurz is shown visiting France and Germany after becoming the chancellor. Between chancellor Angela Merkel and Sebastian Kurz a disagreement is demonstrated.

Angela Merkel accused Kurz of not showing solidarity within the EU. Kurz criticizes the shifting of more competences to the European Union and laments that human traffickers (“Schlepper”) are dictating who Europe has to take in as refugee or migrant. In his foreign visits, Kurz defends his vice-chancellor of the far-right FPÖ party (Heinz Christian Strache) against critical questions and ascertains that judgements are only fair after actions have been taken and pleaded to give him a chance adding that the coalition agreement between his conservative ÖVP party and the FPÖ is pro-European (RT DE, 18 Jan. 2018).

Sebastian Kurz is also shown to condemn antisemitism not just once, declaring Austria’s collective responsibility and faults in the Second World War and the Holocaust. When talking about antisemitism, he stresses that he will fight against all forms of antisemitism, also the imported antisemitism of muslim foreigners. Sebastian Kurz addressing antisemitism in Germany can be seen in connection to his efforts to introducing his junior-partner in the coalition, the far right FPÖ, and some concern of the public with a far right party in government (RT DE, 5 Mai 2019; RT DE, 18 Jan. 2018).

Another issue Kurz addresses in Germany is the so-called “Enteignungsdebatte”, the expropriation debate and invites German investors to invest in Austrian real-estate (RT DE, 11 May 2019).

Heinz Christian Strache

The issues the vice-chancellor of the Kurz I coalition, Heinz Christian Strache (FPÖ) draws on are the topics of (so-called illegal) migration. He announces that asylum seekers shall be housed only by government facilities instead of partially private facilities, such as those of NGOs and stopping any profits of this. His general aim is to stop “illegal” migration entirely and Strache sees "complete failure of political leaders" during the migration wave. In another example, he can imagine to move asylum seekers into empty military barracks and implementing a nightly curfew for the asylum seekers (RT DE, 5 Jan 2018).

After his resignation due to the “Ibiza”-scandal, RT writes:

“It was clear that Strache's resignation as Vice Chancellor of the Republic of Austria and his resignation as head of the FPÖ would also trigger reactions from his big German brother. But the outspoken gloating and know-it-all attitude of some politicians seems somewhat comical and questionable in view of the polarized political landscape in Germany”(RT DE, 18.May 2019)

ÖVP

The conservative party ÖVP, that of the chancellor Sebastian Kurz, is barely mentioned and if it is, then it is connected to the persona of Sebastian Kurz. One example of when the conservative party ÖVP and Sebastian Kurz are not the same element, is when the leader of the ÖVP parliamentary fraction August Wöginger calls the shortening of social welfare a milestone in welfare policy (RT DE, 26.Apr. 2019).

5.1.1.2. Category: Opposition

FPÖ

First and foremost the populist right party FPÖ is described as merely “right” party, when it is mentioned and when it is called populist right then “populist” is in quotation marks (RT DE, 9 Mai 2019).

The FPÖ appears in RT articles when FPÖ representatives talk about migration issues, e.g. connecting social welfare for migrants with language skills and curtailing benefits when language skills are not demonstrated. Primarily, when Heinz Christian Strache talks about migration as can be seen above. Another illuminating example is Gottfried Waldhäusl, who appears with his “10 commandments for immigrants”. They are supposed to be passed on to asylum seekers and migrants as guidelines and contain commands such as “you shall obey Austrian laws”, “you shall protect animals from unnecessary suffering” or “you shall live in gratitude to Austria” (RT DE, 13 Mai 2019; RT DE, 17 Mai 2019).

SPÖ

The social democratic party (SPÖ), which was in the opposition in national parliament at the time of the coalition, is cited when they criticize the government’s proposals. Vienna’s Mayor Michael Ludwig and City Councilor for Education Jürgen Czernohorszky criticized Strache for the proposal to settle refugees in neighborhoods with enforced nighttime curfews (RT DE, 5. Jan. 2018).

5.1.1.3. Category: Civil Society

RT shows protest culture on different occasions. In this government period, the protests against the new right-conservative government of Kurz I is depicted. A protester is cited: “*‘Our country will not be conquered by the new fascists,’ shouted an activist from the ‘Platform for a Humane Asylum Policy’, Michael Genner, at the kick-off rally in Vienna*” in an RT article of 13. January 2018. The organisers purportedly accuse the Kurz I government of racist, right-wing extremist and neo-fascist tendencies (RT DE, 13 Jan. 2018).

The Austrian political climate is described as poisoned in the article on hate speech in the internet about a new born baby with muslim parents. The social aid NGO is mentioned in the same article the president Van der Bellen is mentioned in, who also condemned hate speech against the new born baby (RT DE, 8 Jan. 2018).

5.1.2. Thematic Frequency

The following Table 1 shows the topics reported in RT DE on Austria, how often the individual topics were found in the sample and the percentage each topic gathered within the timeframe.

Table 1: Topics of articles during Kurz I

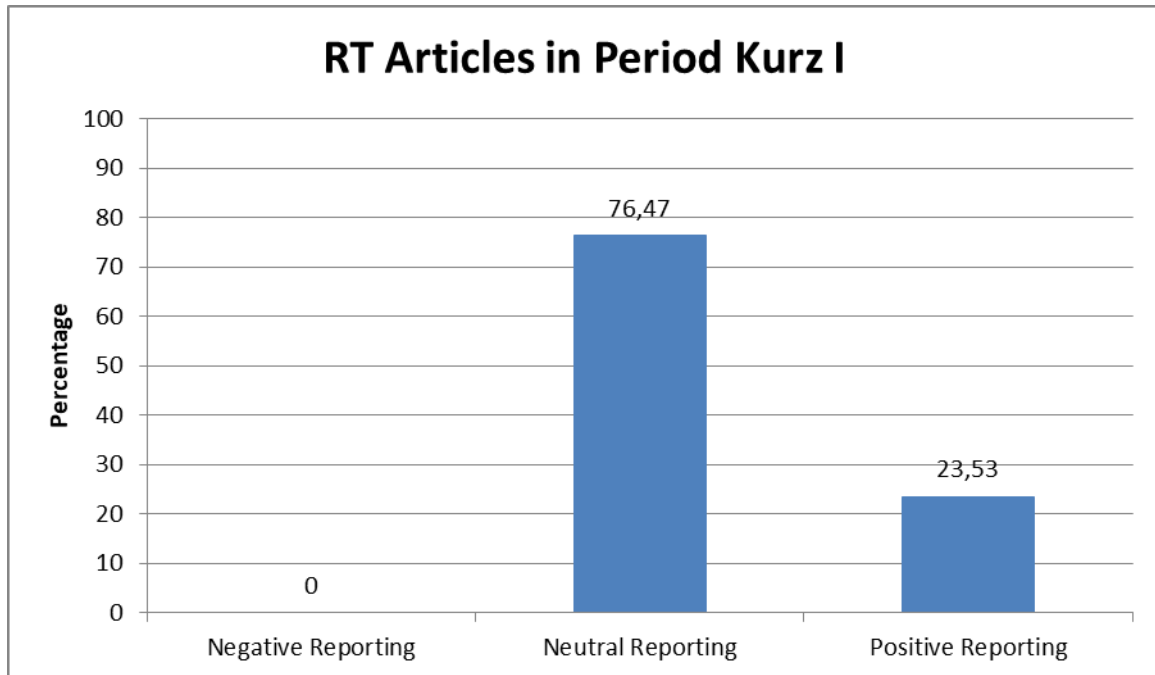
Stats on Articles	Absolute	Relative
Austrian relations to EU-Neighbors	5	~ 27,8 %
Immigrants/Refugees	4	~ 22,2 %
Lack of education of Austrian population	3	~ 16,7 %
Protest against ÖVP-FPÖ government	1	~ 5,6 %
Crime/drug trafficking	1	~ 5,6 %
Social benefits cuts	1	~ 5,6 %
Austrian-Russian relations	1	~ 5,6 %
Resignation of Strache	1	~ 5,6 %
New elections	1	~ 5,6 %
	18	100

Source: own analysis

5.1.3. Media Bias Analysis

The result of the media bias rating is in the following figure 10.

Figure 10: Media bias rating during Kurz I



Source: own analysis

The average media bias rating in this period was ~ 5,53.

(The rating scale went from 0 to 10. $0 \leq x < 4$ was negative, $4 \leq x \leq 6$ was neutral, $6 < x \leq 10$ was positive media bias on the scale.)

H1: RT reports positively on Austrian politics before the Ukraine war.

H2: RT reports negatively on Austrian politics after the start of the Ukraine war.

Overall, RT reporting in the sampled period is neutral. The hypothesis H1 can be rejected.

The hypothesis H2 is not applicable as the time period is before the Ukraine war.

Furthermore, the reporting on the Ibiza Scandal is surprisingly undetailed and not frequently reported on. Especially after the resignation of the vice-chancellor H.C. Strache, reporting showed a positive bias towards the vice-chancellor Strache. However, this did not outweigh the overall neutral position. The thematic agenda shows a wide variety of topics.

5.2. Government Kurz II

The government period of Kurz II lasted from 7.January 2020 to 11.October 2021. The sampled articles were taken from the first and the last 30 days within this period. In this chapter the structured qualitative content analysis, thematic frequency analysis and media bias analysis are presented.

5.2.1. Qualitative Content Analysis

5.2.1.1. Category: Austrian Government Sebastian Kurz

Sebastian Kurz in his second government (Kurz II) is cited as a youngster and as conservative hope at the beginning of the new government coalition (RT DE, 8 Jan. 2020). Kurz addresses the issue of covid vaccinations, stating that vaccinations must be preferable to Lockdowns and covid restriction measures should address only the un-vaccinated. He also addresses environmental issues introducing the CO₂-pricing. *"We have decided to initiate an ecological transition,"* the Chancellor Sebastian Kurz is cited (RT DE a, 4 Okt. 2021). The head of government had even canceled a planned visit to Spain to finalize the negotiations. Pricing of CO₂ emissions is initially to be set at 30 euros per ton from 2022 and gradually grow to 55 Euros by 2025. Another broad field are the following consequences from the Ibiza-Affair in RT. After a judicial house search of the party headquarters of the conservative ÖVP, and the Greens stating that they will vote with the so-called "Misstrauensvotum" (vote of non-confidence in parliament) against Sebastian Kurz, he resigned (RT DE, 9 Okt. 2021). The future outlook of Sebastian Kurz after his resignation is evaluated in an interview with Prof. Heinz Gärtner, as:

"If there are no real criminal convictions there, then there is a very good chance that Kurz will come back. He is 35 years old and can run in the next elections. Kurz has charisma, he is in the waiting position and yet powerful as chairman of the People's Party. He can remain in the waiting position until the allegations slowly disappear from the media. Then perhaps he can run again in the next parliamentary elections in 2024. It is by no means the end of his political career"(RT DE, 10 Okt. 2021).

Werner Kogler

The vice-chancellor Werner Kogler is mentioned in the context of the government crisis, in which the chancellor Sebastian Kurz is confronted with allegations of corruption (9 Okt. 2021). Kogler is portrayed as putting the coalition partner ÖVP under pressure, calling Sebastian Kurz' capacity to act into question and ultimately demanding that Kurz should resign.

Alexander Schallenberg

Alexander Schallenberg as the future chancellor is mentioned only very briefly as the successor of Sebastian Kurz and as the former foreign minister. The new foreign minister Linhart received more in-depth attention with a short biographical introduction to Michael Linhart (RT DE, 9 Okt. 2021; RT DE, 11 Okt. 2021).

ÖVP

The conservative party ÖVP is mainly depicted as standing by the chancellor Sebastian Kurz during the corruption allegations against him and publicly defending him.

Addressing the claim of the Greens' that the coalition is between two parties and not with Sebastian Kurz as a person, RT writes: *"But his party is united behind Chancellor Kurz. The ÖVP ministers rejected the Greens' plan. Cooperation with the Greens can only continue with Kurz, they stressed in a joint statement"*(RT DE, 8 Okt. 2021) The conservative leaders in the Austrian provinces are depicted as supporting Sebastian Kurz in the following way: *"It was 'assumed that the accusations relevant to criminal law will turn out to be false and can also be cleared up,' it[the statement] said. 'Especially in the current situation, it is in any case quite crucial for our country that we continue to have a stable federal government with Chancellor Sebastian Kurz at its head.' "*(RT DE, 8 Okt. 2021).

After the resignation of Sebastian Kurz, the conservative party is shortly analyzed by Heinz Gärtner for RT as such: *"The ÖVP will recover from this, it still has governmental power in its hands. The previous foreign minister, Schallenberg, will become chancellor. The ÖVP will remain the governing party until the next elections. [...]Of course, the real power in the People's Party now lies with the state governors, and they retain their positions. I do not believe that the People's Party as a party will emerge damaged from this scandal"* (RT DE, 10 Okt. 2021).

The Greens

The Green party is mentioned in RT articles in this government period mainly for addressing the chancellor Sebastian Kurz after the corruption allegations, pressuring the conservative party to change the chancellor with another person than Sebastian Kurz and ultimately supporting the vote of no confidence, if Sebastian Kurz would not resign by himself (RT DE, 9 Okt. 2021; RT DE, 8 Okt. 2021). It is also mentioned shortly in the results of the Upper Austrian elections (the Green party reaching the fourth place) (RT DE, 27 Sep. 2021).

Michael Linhart

The new foreign minister Michael Linhart is introduced with few biographic data (RT DE, 11 Okt 2021).

Austrian Neutrality

Austria's international positioning is addressed as well. First, it should be noted that the former foreign minister Karin Kneissl often takes the role of a prominent commentator of international affairs in RT Deutsch (RT DE b, 4 Okt. 2021).

A closely described development was the entering of a NATO-aircraft in Austrian airspace. RT headlines on 11th Sept. were the following : *“Austria reacts indignantly to serious airspace violation by NATO aircraft”*. Austrian military airplanes guided the Hungarian aircraft down from the air in order to land. Austrian officials of the ministry of defence called the intrusion a massive threat of air borne security. At the end of the article, a paragraph explains the military status of Austria as follows:

“The small Alpine state, located in the heart of Europe and largely surrounded by NATO members, is not itself a member of the alliance. Austria's military status is enshrined in a special constitutional law on neutrality, which states that Austria may not host foreign bases on its territory”(RT DE, 11 Sep. 2021).

5.2.1.2. Category: Opposition

SPÖ

The Austrian social democratic party is cited for criticizing in various instances. They criticize the ÖVP for allegedly wanting to take control of the judicial system. They criticize Sebastian Kurz for damaging Austria. They criticize (together with the FPÖ) that sanctions are implemented against unemployed who do not apply for suitable jobs in order to prevent getting vaccinated (RT DE, 6 Okt. 2021; RT DE a, 17 Sep. 2021).

FPÖ

The far right party FPÖ is cited in the context of the FPÖ-Ball, formerly the so-called “scholars’ ball” (“Akademikerball”), which has been frequented by many far right politicians from all over the world. Large demonstrations occurred against this ball (RT DE, 25 Jan. 2020). Another instance is where the FPÖ visits the German sister party “Alternative for Deutschland” and hold talks on commonalities. In this event, RT DE also interviews Herbert Kickl of the FPÖ about his opinion on migration policy in Europe and the new government coalition between the Greens and the conservatives (RT DE, 28 Jan. 2020). Furthermore, the FPÖ is shown as criticizing sanctions against unemployed (RT DE a, 17 Sep. 2021). Lastly, they are mentioned in passing in local elections in upper Austria (they reached second place in the elections in Upper Austria)(RT DE, 27 Sep. 2021) as well as concerning the time before Sebastian Kurz resigned. In the latter, the FPÖ commented that Kurz is damaging Austria’s reputation by staying in office in light of the allegations (RT DE, 8 Okt. 2021).

5.2.1.3. Category: Civil Society

Martin Sellner

The extreme right activist and head of the Identitarian Movement of Austria Martin Sellner is mentioned in two instances. One article is devoted entirely to him, stating that his bank has quit his private bank account, which allegedly was already the 17th time that a bank had done that (RT DE, 17 Jan. 2020). Additionally, he is briefly mentioned as a guest to the ball of the FPÖ (“Akademikerball”) and where he states that his participation at the ball should not be a topic of domestic politics (RT DE, 25 Jan. 2020).

5.2.2. Thematic Frequency

The following Table 2 shows the topics reported in RT DE on Austria, how often the individual topics were found in the sample and the percentage each topic gathered within the timeframe.

Table 2: Topics of articles during Kurz II

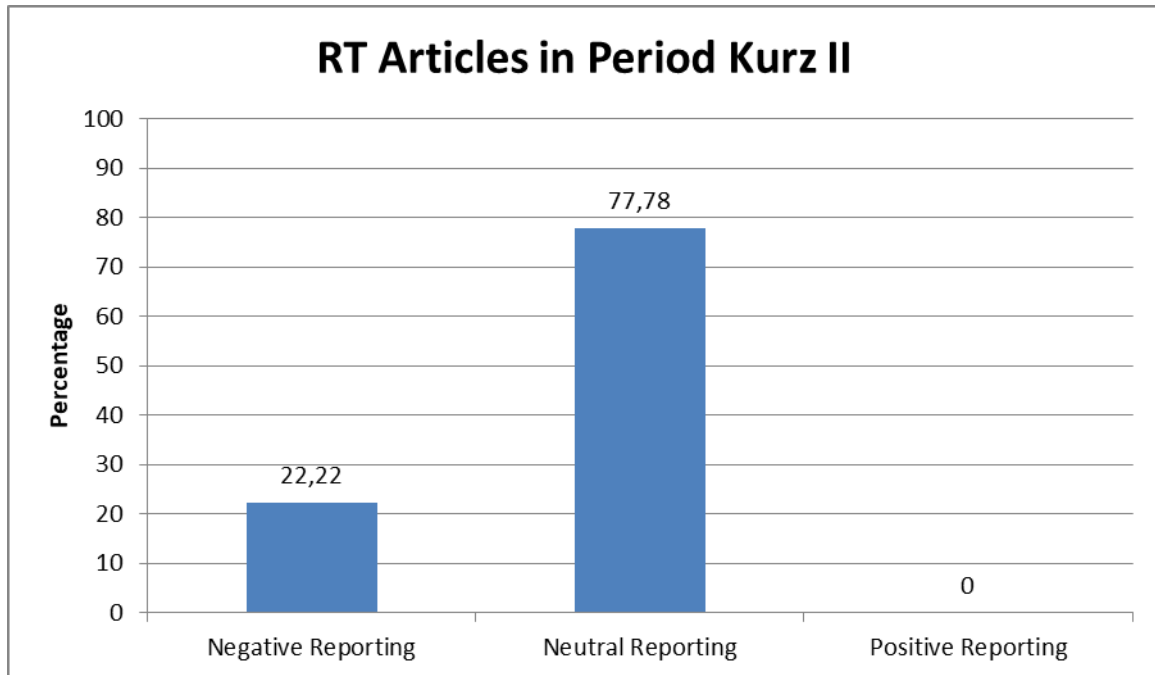
Stats on Articles	Absolute	Relative
Covid-related	4	22,2 %
Government crisis (<i>includes reports on allegations, resignation and new government members</i>)	4	22,2 %
FPÖ activity	2	11,1 %
Far right activist Martin Sellner	1	5,6 %
Austrian neutrality	1	5,6 %
LGBTQ	1	5,6 %
Public administration	1	5,6 %
Appointment of Sebastian Kurz as chancellor	1	5,6 %
Eco-social tax reform	1	5,6 %
International relations – Karin Kneissl	1	5,6 %
Advertisement affair (“Inseratenaffäre”)	1	5,6 %
	18	100 %

Source: own analysis

5.2.3. Media Bias Analysis

The result of the media bias rating is in the following figure 11.

Figure 11: Media bias rating during Kurz II



Source: own analysis

The average media bias rating in this period was 4,5.

(The rating scale went from 0 to 10. $0 \leq x < 4$ was negative, $4 \leq x \leq 6$ was neutral, $6 < x \leq 10$ was positive media bias on the scale.)

H1: RT reports positively on Austrian politics before the Ukraine war.

H2: RT reports negatively on Austrian politics after the start of the Ukraine war.

Overall, RT reporting was neutral. H1 is rejected. H2 is not applicable due to the period before the war. The shift towards negative media bias was created by an overemphasis of the FPÖ position in their reporting and a peculiar prominence of Martin Sellner, the leading figure of the far right Identitarian Movement.

5.3. Government Schallenberg I

The government period of Schallenberg I lasted from 11.October 2021 to 6.December 2021. Because the government period lasted less than 60 days, taking the first and last 30 days of the period meant sampling the entire government period. In this chapter the structured qualitative content analysis, thematic frequency analysis and media bias analysis are presented.

5.3.1. Qualitative Content Analysis

5.3.1.1. Category: Austrian Government

Sebastian Kurz

Sebastian Kurz also receives attention after his resignation in the new government period of chancellor Schallenberg. Sebastian Kurz is reported on only in connection with the allegations concerning the advertising scandal (“Inseraten-Affäre”) and the allegations against him for false testimony in front of the parliamentary investigative committee (“U-Ausschuss”) (RT DE, 15 Okt. 2021; RT DE, 14 Okt. 2021). It is noteworthy, that much more detail is presented since Sebastian Kurz is not in government anymore. Furthermore, it is reported that the state attorney pleaded for his parliamentary immunity to be lifted, which was granted, as well as a long legal process will await Sebastian Kurz, RT writes.

RT begins one article as follows:

“The ex-chancellor is now being investigated for breach of trust and corruption, as the Wiener Zeitung wrote on Tuesday. According to the report, Kurz is an instigator of a criminal offense (“Bestimmungstäter”)(RT DE, 14 Okt. 2021).

Gernot Blümel

The finance minister Gernot Blümel of the last government is mentioned only when he resigned and it was reported that the reason for this was Kurz' resignation as well as death threats he and his family received (RT DE b, 2. Dez 2021).

Alexander Schallenberg

The new chancellor Alexander Schallenberg is mentioned in RT reporting for standing by Sebastian Kurz in the corruption allegations. He is mentioned in regards to covid-restrictions and the introduction of the mandatory vaccination. For his resignation, RT writes:

“This marks the end of the shortest chancellorship in Austria's history after just 52 days. Shortly before, on Thursday, his predecessor, ex-Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, had already announced his complete retirement from politics”(RT DE a, 2 Dez. 2021).

ÖVP

The new chancellor Alexander Schallenberg stands by Sebastian Kurz and states that the allegations will not materialize in legal consequences. However, RT reports that:

“While successor Schallenberg continues to stand by him, reportedly within the ÖVP, breakaway movements have begun regarding Kurz”(RT DE, 14 Okt. 2021).

The Greens

Even though Sebastian Kurz is described with more detail about the allegations against him, the Greens are cited in the context of Kurz's resignation as a central factor. RT writes:

“The Greens, the ÖVP's coalition partner, had already turned against him [when the state attorney started investigating against him]. Werner Kogler, the vice chancellor they appointed, had most recently described Kurz as "unfit for office" and given him an ultimatum: Resignation or a vote of no confidence by all other parties at a special session of the National Council, the Austrian parliament. The chancellor forestalled this by resigning, and in the future he will assume the function of "Klubobmann" (parliamentary party leader) of the ÖVP in the National Council”(RT DE, 14 Okt. 2021).

Covid-Restrictions

RT reports most on covid-restrictions in this government period. The restrictions introduced are reported on in detail, such as the reported introduction of 3-G (“geimpft, genesen, getestet”), which allowed only the tested, vaccinated or the recovered to certain public spaces. 2-G (“geimpft, genesen”) meant only recovered or vaccinated were allowed to certain public spaces, e.g. restaurants. Besides the close descriptions of the measures, RT closely added certain frames, which can be seen from the following citations.

“More than a year and a half after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 pandemic, fundamental rights and society remain massively restricted”(RT DE, 13.Okt. 2021).

The mandatory vaccination is described as unpopular in the following citation:

“The measure proved unpopular in Austrian society and sparked mass protests across the country, with tens of thousands of people speaking out in favor of a voluntary decision to vaccinate. Meanwhile, the number of new infections in Austria stands at 10,478”(RT DE, 29 Nov. 2021).

However, the mandatory vaccination had an approval rate in the Austrian population of more than 50 percent (Trummer 2021).

The mandatory vaccination is reported on very frequently and RT described which sanctions and punishments, including possible jail time, would be applied for those who do not vaccinate themselves against the covid virus.

The **government** is shown to give the “fault” of all the measures to the unvaccinated. They write:

“Politicians are once again blaming the unvaccinated. Too few people have been vaccinated. That's why the government is responding with mandatory vaccination starting in February - without explaining the procedure in more detail”(RT DE, 20 Nov. 2021).

RT proclaims a **political escalation** of the political landscape when they write the following:

“In addition to high numbers of Corona-positive patients, the political situation in Austria is increasingly escalating. Lockdown and compulsory vaccination seem to have been the straw

that broke the camel's back for many: In addition to the FPÖ, parts of the Austrian Armed Forces also promoted the protest march in Vienna on Saturday” (RT DE, 20 Nov. 2021).

RT draws on some conspiracy theories about the covid-restrictions, which are stated in the following:

“For example, in his book from March 30, 2020 ‘The Corona Conundrum,’ Austrian health care scholar and former government advisor Michael Sprenger had observed the actions of Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, who has since resigned: ‘The Chancellor has clearly left the level of factual politics. My guess is that after successfully averting the threat to the health care system and achieving the lockdown goal, he realized that he could use this crisis politically. He has reached absolute peaks in the opinion polls. (...) In any case, Sebastian Kurz is betting on an escalation of fear as of now’ (RT DE, 13 Okt. 2021).

In the following, it is argued that the **government** uses fear as a strategy:

“The situation in the Federal Republic of Germany is similar to that in Austria, as evidenced, among other things, by the strategy paper from the Federal Ministry of the Interior that became public in the spring of 2020. The paper, prepared by ministry advisers, describes targeted fear-mongering as the most important means of rallying the population to the government's Corona policy” (RT DE, 13 Okt. 2021).

Furthering this point, namely that fear is an intended strategy of the **political elite**, RT goes on with:

“The Austrian psychologist [Anna Werksnies] asserts: ‘The best strategy to make someone docile, obedient or conforming is simply to scare them. The more fearful a person becomes, the more he or she is willing to do anything to get rid of the powerful emotion of fear.’ At the same time, large groups of people could not find a way out on their own. Masses, he said, depend on a ‘helper’: ‘At that moment, the knight in golden armor should be at the forefront as the deliverer in distress’. To this end, she said, a lot of money is also spent on image consultants, communications experts, chaos architects and lobbyists. The supposed savior has the best chances, she said, when emotionally charged threat scenarios such as ‘waves of refugees’ or the Sars-Cov-2 virus are ‘carried to the masses in a massively polarizing way.’ ” (RT DE, 13 Okt. 2021).

RT further depicts the government in a specific light, with the following citation:

“As dangerous as the trigger (the virus) may be, the 'condition' we are forced to live in is man-made, or more precisely, government-made”(RT DE, 13 Okt. 2021).

The government, it is speculated, could use these exceptional times of restrictions as follows:

“If this role of the ‘all-powerful liberator’ is maintained in the long term, a social crisis could occur. ‘Perhaps for this very reason, surveillance of everyone becomes the only means of being able to guarantee order and security’, writes the psychologist from Vienna” (RT DE, 13 Okt. 2021).

The government is also shown as a moral actor:

“During the press conference, Health Minister Mückstein called ‘every disinfection dispenser’ a ‘place of charity’. Schallenberg, in turn, quoted the Pope that ‘vaccinating is an act of charity’.”(RT DE, 6 Nov. 2021)

Concerning fake news on Covid, they write the following on 20th November 2021:

“The intensive care units of the clinics - which, similar to Germany, were also reduced instead of strengthened in Austria during the Corona crisis - are overloaded, and the reporting system for Corona infections is also no longer functional”(RT DE, 20 Nov. 2021).

The intensive care units of the clinics were actually not reduced during the Corona crisis, this is fake news as is debunked by the Austrian news organization “corrective” and the reporting system for Corona infections was not out of function (see Thust 2021).

Another aspect RT reported on 13th October 2021 about covid was that the virus was being used in order to "enact measures of extreme restriction on social, cultural and economic life" (RT DE, 13 Okt. 2021).

5.3.1.2. Category: *Opposition*

SPÖ

The social democratic party is mentioned for criticizing the way the government handled the terrorist attack one year after the attack in Nov. 2021 and also proposed a reform of the crime victims law, in order to help victims of terrorism quicker than before (RT DE, 2 Nov. 2021). At the end of the government period when chancellor Schallenberg stepped down and the interior minister Nehammer was to take his place, the governor of Burgenland, Hans Peter Doskozil (SPÖ), called for new elections instead of a possible chancellorship of Karl Nehammer without any elections (RT DE, 2 Dez. 2021). Additionally, they are mentioned in covid-related issues – see below (RT DE, 20 Okt. 2021).

FPÖ

The populist right freedom party (FPÖ) is reported on in various issues. They are mentioned in the reporting on the terrorist attack one year after the attack in Vienna and cited with calling for a serious review of the mistakes of the interior minister and the secret service (RT DE, 2 Nov. 2021). Kickl, head of the FPÖ, called for a new election after the resignation of chancellor Schallenberg. Additionally, they are mentioned frequently in covid-related issues (e.g. RT DE a, 27 Nov. 2021; RT DE, 20 Okt. 2021)

The **opposition parties** in the covid-related articles are depicted as follows:

The SPÖ is shown to support the government in its covid-measures (e.g. RT DE, 20 Okt .2021).

The NEOS are shown to criticize the government measure for 3-G at the workplace and vote against the government in this regard (RT DE, 20 Okt .2021).

The FPÖ is mentioned more often, not only for criticizing the 3-G measure at the workplace, but also for defending the unvaccinated, participating at anti-covid-measures demonstrations. The FPÖ is cited more often than other parties (RT DE, 28 Nov. 2021; RT DE, 2 Nov. 2021; RT DE, 20 Okt. 2021).

5.3.1.3. Category: Civil Society

Among societal groups, soldiers are mentioned for writing an open letter with the title “civil servants for enlightenment” and compared the covid-measures with a “rape”. They went on to compare the measures with National Socialism. They found that with the unvaccinated "after 75 years" people are now again "stigmatized, marginalized and locked away"(RT DE, 20 Nov. 2021).

RT did not mention any criticism regarding this open letter, but descriptively added that also police men showed solidarity with demonstrators, as they did not wear masks (ibid).

Also doctors are mentioned who are against a mandatory vaccination (ibid).

The **group of the unvaccinated** are repeatedly singled out in the reporting, as for example with citing a psychologist:

“For the ‘liberator’[the political elite/the government] it is important to then provide a ‘scapegoat’, according to the psychologist. Currently, in the Corona crisis that has been going on for a year and a half, those in power are showing how this works with their talk of the ‘pandemic of the unvaccinated’ and their actions against them” (RT DE, 13 Okt. 2021).

Also politicians talk of the “pandemic of the unvaccinated”, such as by the chancellor Alexander Schallenberg (RT DE, 13 Okt. 2021).

RT often reports on demonstrations and reports that groups like doctors, police and some military officials also participated there as well as the FPÖ. They also write that the corona-demonstrations went peacefully as in this example of a demonstration of 20. November 2021:

“According to the police, the meeting was generally peaceful. According to the report, a total of 159 administrative notices related to coronavirus were filed. This mostly concerned the mask obligation”(RT DE, 20 Nov. 2021).

This description can be compared to a description in an article from the ORF, the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation, about the same demonstration:

“Tens of thousands took part in a large demonstration against the CoV measures in Vienna on Saturday. The police spoke of 40,000 participants, the FPÖ of 100,000. The mood was heated, there were isolated clashes. There were ten arrests and ten charges under the NS Prohibition Act” (ORF WIEN, 20. Nov. 2021).

RT does not write about the heated mood, isolated clashes, and most concerning of all, it does not write about the ten charges under the National Socialism Prohibition Act.

Freedom of speech is mentioned in the context of the psychologist (mentioned above already), when she writes:

“Regarding their concern, they write that the de facto state of exception that has prevailed for more than a year makes it necessary to raise one's voice against it. The imposed new normality has become unbearable for many of us” (RT DE, 13 Okt. 2021).

5.3.1.3.1. Category: Civil Society and Media

The ORF (Austrian Broadcasting Corporation) is mentioned in the context of covid for its "Licht ins Dunkel" (Light into Darkness) fundraising gala "broadcast live on television, followed by a drink, which caused considerable resentment among citizens", because politicians and media representatives did not stick to the obligatory covid-measures, while the country was in lockdown (RT DE a., 27 Nov. 2021; RT DE, 23 Nov. 2021). Additionally, the ORF is cited with the following paragraph:

"In view of low vaccination rates in the country, the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation is holding a lottery with enticing prizes for those willing to be vaccinated. Under the motto 'Whoever vaccinates wins,' the lottery is intended to provide additional incentives for vaccination. The main prize: a prefabricated house" (RT DE a, 27 Nov. 2021).

5.3.2. Thematic Frequency

The following Table 3 shows the topics reported in RT DE on Austria, how often the individual topics were found in the sample and the percentage each topic gathered within the timeframe.

Table 3: Topics of articles during Schallenberg I

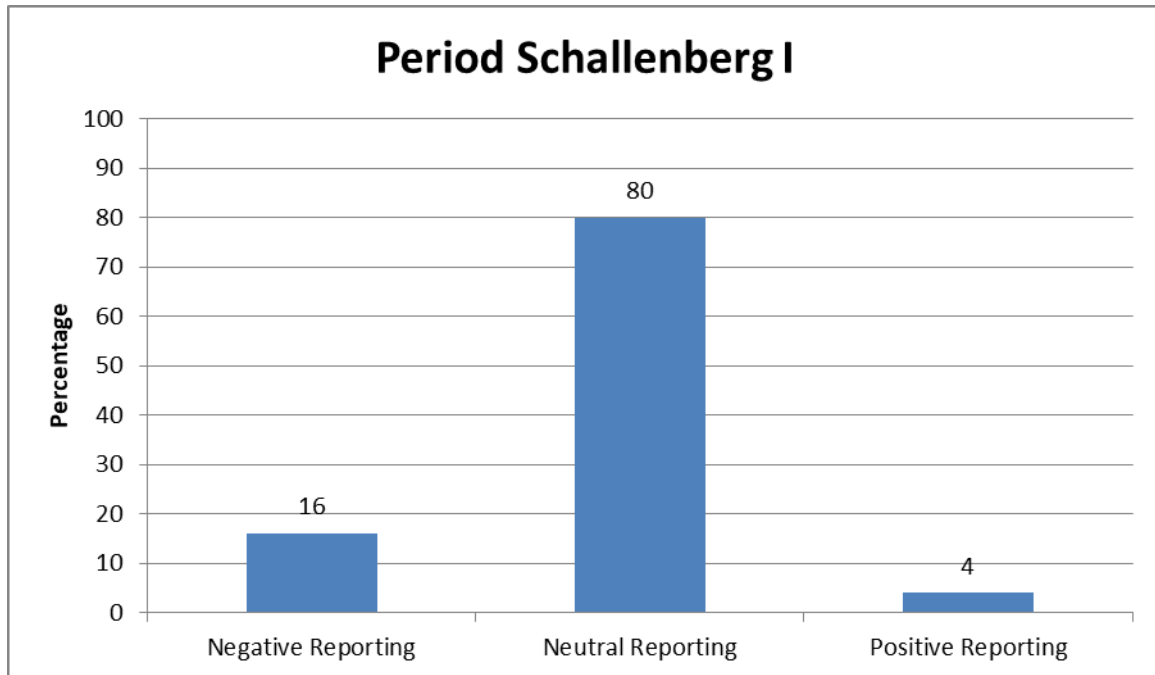
Stats on Articles	Absolute	Relative
Covid-related	18	72 %
Criminal proceeding against Sebastian Kurz	2	8 %
Resignation of members of government	2	8 %
Assisted Suicide	1	4 %
Terrorism	1	4 %
Migration/crime/human trafficking	1	4 %
	25	100 %

Source: own analysis

5.3.3. Media Bias Analysis

The result of the media bias rating is in the following figure 12.

Figure 12: Media bias rating during Schallenberg I



Source: own analysis

The average media bias rating in this period was 4,52.

(The rating scale went from 0 to 10. $0 \leq x < 4$ was negative, $4 \leq x \leq 6$ was neutral, $6 < x \leq 10$ was positive media bias on the scale.)

H1: RT reports positively on Austrian politics before the Ukraine war.

H2: RT reports negatively on Austrian politics after the start of the Ukraine war.

Overall, RT reporting was neutral. H1 is rejected. H2 is not applicable due to the time period before the Ukraine war. .

There is a clear overemphasis in agenda-setting. The covid pandemic fills 72% of the reporting during the entire government period. Neutral news reports outnumber the negatively biased articles.

5.4. Government Nehammer I before the start of the Ukraine War

The government period of Nehammer I before the start of the war lasted from 6. December 2021 to 23. February 2022. The sampled articles were taken from the first and the last 30 days within this period. In this chapter the structured qualitative content analysis, thematic frequency and media bias analysis are presented.

5.4.1. Qualitative Content Analysis

5.4.1.1 Category: Government

The government is primarily shown in the context of covid-restriction measures and is essentially equated with the measures they implemented. They are positioned into a dichotomous position, the people versus the elite, as demonstrations against the covid measures are frequently reported on. Additionally, the government is characterised for following the science when it comes to Covid measures, disregarding the civil society demonstrations on the streets (RT DE, 7 Dez. 2021; RT DE a, 9 Dez 2021; RT DE b, 9 Dez 2021).

Mandatory vaccinations are reported on frequently (mentioned 65 times in all articles in this government period sample). The planned sanctions between 600 and 3600 Euros are reported on frequently. The aim of the mandatory vaccination is to exert pressure on the unvaccinated to get vaccinated (RT DE, 17 Feb. 2022). Another mention of the unvaccinated are that they were initially not included by the lifting of a lockdown, but a little later (RT DE a, 31 Jan. 2022). The unvaccinated could free themselves of sanctions from the mandatory vaccination through “active repentance” (“tätige Reue” in German), which would mean getting vaccinated, the government stated (RT DE a, 9 Dez 2021). RT reports that the introduction of the mandatory vaccination caused lots of protests in Austria (RT DE b, 9 Dez. 2021).

The risks of the covid vaccination is indirectly reported on through RT’s choice of topics. They report in-depth about a 12 year old boy dying few days after the covid vaccination, even though the cause has not been ascertained yet (RT DE a, 17 Feb 2022). Details on the statistics of side effects of the covid vaccine as well as deaths connected to covid are mentioned (ibid). The benefits are not reported on, except for one slim citation of a doctor at the end of a long article: “ ‘There is a risk [concerning the vaccination], you can't deny that at all. But the benefit is much higher!’ This applies to all age groups, says Wirthumer-Hoche”(ibid).

5.4.1.2. Category: Opposition

Within the group of parliamentary opposition parties, the FPÖ receives more attention and is demonstrated as the only “real” opposition force. This is due to the fact, that the other opposition parties support the covid measures, whereas the FPÖ does not and participated in the anti-covid demonstrations.

SPÖ

The social democrats are depicted as favouring stricter measures in Vienna than the government (e.g. RT DE, 29 Jan. 2022). They are also mentioned for running a pro-vaccination campaign with pictures of crying children stating, that they don’t want to lose you to covid referring to covid deaths (RT DE b, 31 Jan. 2022).

NEOS

The liberal NEOS are cited for voting for the mandatory covid vaccine and calling it a civil duty (RT DE a, 9 Dez. 2021).

FPÖ

The populist right FPÖ are mentioned much more frequently than the other parties. It is reported that the FPÖ is the only party that opposed the mandatory vaccine (RT DE a, 9 Dez. 2021). FPÖ leader Kickl is mentioned calling for resistance against the mandatory vaccination (RT DE, 11 Dez. 2021). Kickl demands a withdrawal of all corona measures in order for the Austrian economy to recover (RT DE, 29 Jan. 2022). FPÖ hosted the fired and contentious medicine professor Sönnichsen critical of the covid restriction measures at a press conference (RT DE, 22 Dez. 2021). FPÖ calls the Upper Austrian vaccination campaign of the SPÖ propaganda and demands it to be stopped (RT DE b, 31 Jan. 2022).

5.4.1.3. Category: Civil Society

Reporting on the civil society focuses a lot on demonstrations and repeatedly mentions that important societal professional groups, such as pharmacists, policemen, soldiers, and even doctors also partake in verbal public criticism or in demonstrations against the government covid restrictions. Demonstrations are described as peaceful, even when they are reported not as peaceful by Austrian media outlets (RT DE, 27 Dez. 2021).

Even when the government announces easing the covid measures, criticism is mentioned for example from the province of Vienna about easing measures (RT DE, 29 Jan. 2022). The easing of covid restrictions are explained as the consequence of the pressure built up by the society, the military and the police through the covid demonstrations (RT DE b, 27 Jan. 2022). In this instance, the demonstrations and all the groups, such as fringe police and soldier groups that participated in them, are considered as representing the entirety of their professional group and more generally representing society (RT DE a, 27 Jan 2022). Another example is, how the Austrian constitutional court addresses the government with several questions about the effectiveness of the covid measures. RT writes that citizens asking similar questions as the constitutional courts were previously disparaged as “Covidiot”, the constitutional court now proves their questions as valid (RT DE a, 31 Jan. 2022).

Freedom of speech is repeatedly addressed directly or indirectly as being jeopardized. Reporting focuses on how the public opposition against government covid restrictions led to sanctions of the professional groups the critics come from. Examples are the pharmacist (RT DE b, 9 Dez. 2021), who applauded covid demonstrators publicly, and received a law suit from the chamber of pharmacists, or the medicine professor Andreas Sönnichsen (RT DE, 22 Dez. 2021), who criticized the covid measures and lost his job at the university of Vienna, the policeman (RT DE a, 27 Jan. 2022), who criticized covid measures on the internet and had to deal with professional consequences.

Doctors are depicted as not consensual about covid vaccinations. Tensions between many doctors and the Austrian medical chamber, its president Thomas Szekeres who proposed disciplinary consequences for doctors who discouraged patients from getting vaccinated, are reported on (RT DE, 15 Dez. 2021) and even the mandatory vaccination for doctors (RT DE, 8 Dez. 2021). Doctors against the mandatory vaccination are reported on (RT DE, 8 Dez. 2021).

The role of science is indirectly criticized in the RT reporting. The medical professor Sönnichsen is cited for finding the discourse culture in science concerning covid as being limited and freedom being curtailed. *“Established ‘scientific dogmas’ are considered irrefutable, according to Sönnichsen”*, RT reports (RT DE, 22 Dez 2021). One policeman is cited for stating that vaccinations are part of the problem, not the solution, as ever more variations will follow after the Omicron Covid-virus and vaccinations will continuously be an issue (RT DE a, 27 Jan. 2022).

5.4.1.3.1. Category: Civil Society and Media

The Western and Austrian media is depicted for not being objective. RT reports that sanctions receive permanent attention in Western media. The prohibition of RT DE in Germany was compared to the prohibition of the media outlet “Deutsche Welle” in Russia. Austrian media, RT writes, only shortly report about this prohibition. However, the prohibition of “Deutsche Welle” received lots of attention, it immediately is denounced as deliberate action. It is barely mentioned that this is a mere retaliation for prohibiting RT DE, RT describe (RT DE, 14 Feb. 2022).

RT writes, that the short and apparently distorting reporting in social media in regard to covid demonstrators also should contribute to the fact that readers will seek alternative news sites to inform themselves about the historic dimensions the government is behaving in, namely along the lines of the Metternich repression state repressing the freedom of speech. Additionally, media disregard their codex of honour, RT wrote (RT DE a, 27 Jan. 2022).

RT specifically criticizes Austrian media as well. An example is the following:

"The more severe the situation is in a specific country, the more aggressive the media campaign against Russia. Austrian reporters from Moscow no longer write in black and white. They have agreed to write 'and with Russians the situation is even worse' "(RT DE, 14 Feb 2022).

Concerning the role of media in the covid pandemic, RT wrote that in the case of a police man publicly criticizing covid restrictions, the media also regularly mention the accusations of bullying and abuse of office made against him, although no criminal facts have been asserted. Hence, RT implied the Austrian media are campaigning against him (RT DE a, 27 Jan. 2022).

Before the start of the war in the Ukraine, RT wrote that, Western politicians and media are spreading scare tactics by talking about an allegedly planned invasion of Ukraine by Russia. The media's image is fabricated and does not correspond to reality according to RT (RT DE, 28 Jan. 2022).

5.4.1.4. Category: Austrian-Russian Relations

The economic damage of the covid measures is reported on and especially the non-acceptance of the Austrian government of the Russian made Sputnik V vaccination is understood as damaging the economy, because eastern European workers vaccinated with the Sputnik V vaccination could not enter Austria. Additionally, Austria's non-recognition of the Sputnik V vaccination certificate could create obstacles in Austrian-Russian relations, Russian Ambassador Lyubinsky stated in an RT report (RT DE b, 12 Feb. 2022).

In regard to Austrian-Russian relations, the foreign minister is depicted as confronting Russia or not being diplomatic towards Russia given the comments he is mentioned with.

The foreign minister Alexander Schallenberg was asked in an interview what he thought of his predecessor Karin Kneissl and stated he would never dance with Vladimir Putin. Kremlin spokesperson Peskow answered that in Russia it isn't common for two men to dance with each other (RT DE, 26 Jan. 2022).

RT reports that Austria supports the EU sanctions against Russia and the foreign minister Alexander Schallenberg portrays Austria as diplomatically acting on the side of Western actors, above all in allegiance with the European Union. Schallenberg is cited for calling the Russian recognition of the breakaway People's republics in eastern Ukraine as a breach of international law and infliction of Ukraine's sovereignty. The Russian diplomat to Austria in Vienna is summoned to the Austrian Foreign Ministry after Russia recognized the breakaway republics Donetsk and Lugansk in Eastern Ukraine (RT DE, 22 Feb. 2022).

Alexander Schallenberg called out any form of military escalation by Russia a security threat [just before the war in the Ukraine], in order to attain more visibility in negotiating with the West about security. Furthermore Schallenberg called this a form of evidence for admitting their failure (RT DE, 26. Jan 2022). On the other side, Russia is depicted as peacefully sending a diplomatic note within the OSCE to the Western members (including Austria) with questions concerning how they intend to fulfill their duties of the OSCE contracts, specifically concerning the obligation not to strengthen the security of one state at the expense of other states, which is enshrined in OSCE treaties (RT DE, 31 Jan. 2022).

A central pillar, and the only pillar mentioned, in the Austro-Russian relations reported in RT are Russian gas exports to Austria with a long historic track record. Russia denies using gas as a weapon against the West and considers the topic of Russian gas to be an object of information warfare against Russia. Russia believes it will remain a reliable deliverer of Russian gas to Austria. RT wrote, that the gas issue, the imposition of sanctions and the non-stop threats against Russia are part of the information attack against Russia. Austrian business circles have recognized this, RT reported (RT DE, 14 Feb. 2022).

The West is considered to send more and more weapons and even troops to the Ukraine. The likelihood of a conflictual outbreak rises and the West does not seem to care about this, RT wrote (RT DE, 22 Feb. 2022). In the case of a conflict, the NATO states would be the worst off. RT reported that the West was to blame for developments in eastern Ukraine because it tolerated "*ultranationalist manifestations in Kiev*," supported the rearmament of Ukraine, and the issued declarations of "*boundless solidarity with Ukraine*" (RT DE, 22 Feb. 2022).

Russia - in light of Western solidarity with perceived dangers in Eastern Ukraine and NATO activity in Europe - demanded security guarantees from NATO. This, however, was acquitted by the USA that Russia will not stop the policy of open doors of the NATO (RT DE, 22 Feb. 2022).

Russia sees itself as the victim of information warfare from the West beyond Europe (RT DE, 14 Feb. 2022).

Karin Kneissl, a former Austrian foreign minister under the government Kurz I, has become a commentator for RT. She is mentioned for analyzing international relations. In this context RT wrote in this sampling period about Karin Kneissl who stated that the threat from Russia experienced by the West for Ukraine was a rhetorical fanfare in the collective West and a sign of "war euphoria" (RT DE, 28 Jan. 2022). Furthermore, RT wrote that the dance between Putin and Kneissl at her wedding at the time caused a media outcry and was interpreted as a submission under Putin. In the RT reporting, she was introduced as a middle east expert, author, former diplomat and foreign minister (RT DE, 26 Jan. 2022).

5.4.2. Thematic Frequency

The following Table 4 shows the topics reported in RT DE on Austria, how often the individual topics were found in the sample and the percentage each topic gathered within the timeframe.

Table 4: Topics of articles during Nehammer I before the Ukraine war

Stats on Articles	Absolute	Relative
Covid-related	22	~78,6 %
Austrian-Russian relations	4	~ 14,3 %
Assisted Suicide	1	~ 3,6 %
International Relations	1	~ 3,6 %
	28	100 %

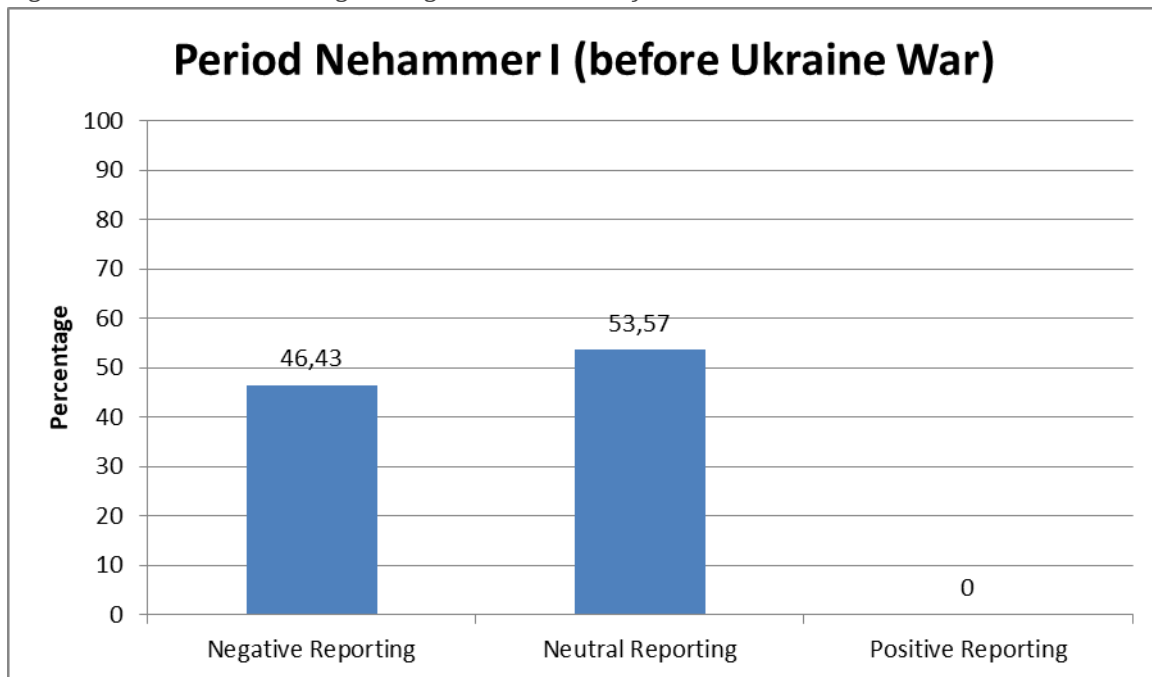
Source: own analysis

In this government period before the war, the spectrum of issues is strongly reduced compared to the other government periods. Furthermore, one issue is dominating the reporting: the covid-pandemic.

5.4.3. Media Bias Analysis

The result of the media bias rating is in the following figure 13.

Figure 13: Media bias rating during Nehammer I before the Ukraine war



Source: own analysis

The average media bias rating in this period was 2,64.

(The rating scale went from 0 to 10. $0 \leq x < 4$ was negative, $4 \leq x \leq 6$ was neutral, $6 < x \leq 10$ was positive media bias on the scale.)

H1: RT reports positively on Austrian politics before the Ukraine war.

H2: RT reports negatively on Austrian politics after the start of the Ukraine war.

The reporting on Austria has become negatively biased in this government period.

H1 can be rejected. H2 is not applicable.

It is clear that RT reporting during the Nehammer I government period before the Ukraine war is distorting and negative towards the government and the media. It reported mainly on covid, Austrian-Russian relations and the media in a negative manner.

5.5. Government Nehammer I after the start of the Ukraine War

The government period of Nehammer I after the start of the war lasted from 24. February 2022 up to today. The sampled articles were taken from the first 30 days and the last 30 days of the time of sampling articles, which was the 26. May 2023. This meant taking the sample of the last month from 26. April to 26. May 2023. In this chapter the structured qualitative content analysis, thematic frequency and media bias analysis are presented.

5.5.1. Qualitative Content Analysis

5.5.1.1. Category: Austrian Government

The reporting on the covid pandemic in this sample period of the government Nehammer I after the start of the Ukraine war becomes less frequent in absolute terms. In regard to the government, the resignation of Rudolf Mückstein, the Austrian minister of health is reported on. The new minister Johannes Rauch is cited for supporting the vaccination (RT DE, 4 Mär. 2022). The covid pandemic measures are also reported on. The decision not to implement the mandatory vaccination due to the decision of the expert committee is cited as well as that this decision is only temporary, as the expert committee will regularly make evaluations (RT DE, 9. Mär. 2022). The day, in which all covid-measures fell is called “*Freedom Day*”(RT DE, 21 Mär. 2022). The loosening of covid restrictions concern the reduction of mandatory quarantine days. The mandatory vaccination is reported on and mentioned that it is the only general mandatory vaccination in the EU, which also imposes a fine of up to 3.600 Euros (RT DE, 21 Mär. 2022; RT DE, 5 Mär. 2022).

ÖVP

The conservative ÖVP is mentioned also in the context of ÖVP-affiliated ministers managing covid measures (RT DE, 9 Mär. 2022). It is mentioned in the context of the RT prohibition, which the ÖVP supported (RT DE, 24 Mär. 2022). It is also mentioned in the context of Alexander Schallenberg and Austrian-Russian relations, merely as the party affiliation of the foreign minister (RT DE, 24 Mai 2023).

The Greens

The Green party is mentioned in the reporting on the resignation of Wolfgang Mückstein, the former minister of health. It is also mentioned as the party affiliation of the new health minister Johannes Rauch, who is cited in various covid-related measures (RT DE, 4 Mär. 2022). Lastly, it is reported on the issue of the RT prohibition which the Greens supported in parliament (RT DE, 24 Mär. 2022).

5.5.1.2. Category: Opposition

FPÖ

Surprisingly, the populist right FPÖ is not mentioned in regard to covid reporting in this period. They are extensively mentioned in reporting about the RT prohibition (RT DE, 24 Mär. 2022).

SPÖ

The social democrats are reported on only in the context of the debate regarding the prohibition of RT diffusion in Austria, which they supported (RT DE, 24 Mär. 2022).

NEOS

The liberal party is mentioned for supporting RT prohibition in parliament (RT DE, 24 Mär. 2022).

5.5.1.3. Category: Civil Society

5.5.1.3.1. Category: Civil Society and Media

RT reports on the decision to ban RT diffusion in Austria. The reported reason for this step is to stop the diffusion of fake news regarding the war in the Ukraine. The sharing of RT content can be sanctioned with up to 50.000 Euros. All parties in the national council (Nationalrat) are for the prohibition of RT airing - except for the populist right FPÖ. The law was discussed in parliament as the FPÖ was against this step. The party criticized that this ban would curtail freedom of speech and opinion as well as further so-called cancel culture. The FPÖ is even cited for criticizing Russia for restricting freedom of speech and the press. According to them, Austria is not better than Russia by doing this. Alternative media could receive more attention with this step, potentially leading more people reading more conspiracy theories on other alternative media platforms as the readers and viewers of RT would look for other alternative media in the internet. The other parties, it is reported, reacted heavily against this. All other parties in the “Nationalrat” (the directly elected Austrian parliament chamber) contradicted

the FPÖ's arguments. RT is about war propaganda, agitation and misinformation, which must be stopped and therefore, the ban is not censorship, the other parties argued (RT DE, 24 Mär 2022).

5.5.1.4. Category: Austrian-Russian Relations

The relations between Russia and Austria are reported on with the following instances.

Austrian foreign minister Schallenberg mentioned that he upholds informal communication canals with his Russian counterparts and stated that this is important. His Russian counterpart stated officially, that they did not know of any informal or formal communication with the Austrian Foreign minister. The Russian spokesperson also added that they would not even know what to talk about (RT DE, 24 Mai 2023).

At another example, Alexander Schallenberg is cited for stating that he would shake hands with Sergei Lawrow only because of diplomatic etiquette, but with reluctance. Again the Russian side responded that nobody was seeking him to shake his hand (RT DE, 24 Mai 2023).

Ultimately, Austria is depicted as siding with the “West”, pursuing a hostile policy towards Russia and cannot be viewed as a neutral country anymore (RT DE, 24 Mai 2023). In another instance, RT reports that the model of Austrian neutrality would be a model for the Ukraine, that was currently at war with Russia. This article, however, used elements of Russian war propaganda (that are not addressed at Austria, but the Ukraine) (RT DE, 16 Mar 2022).

5.5.2. Thematic Frequency

The following Table 5 shows the topics reported in RT DE on Austria, how often the individual topics were found in the sample and the percentage each topic gathered within the timeframe.

Table 5: Topics of articles during Nehammer I after the start of the Ukraine war

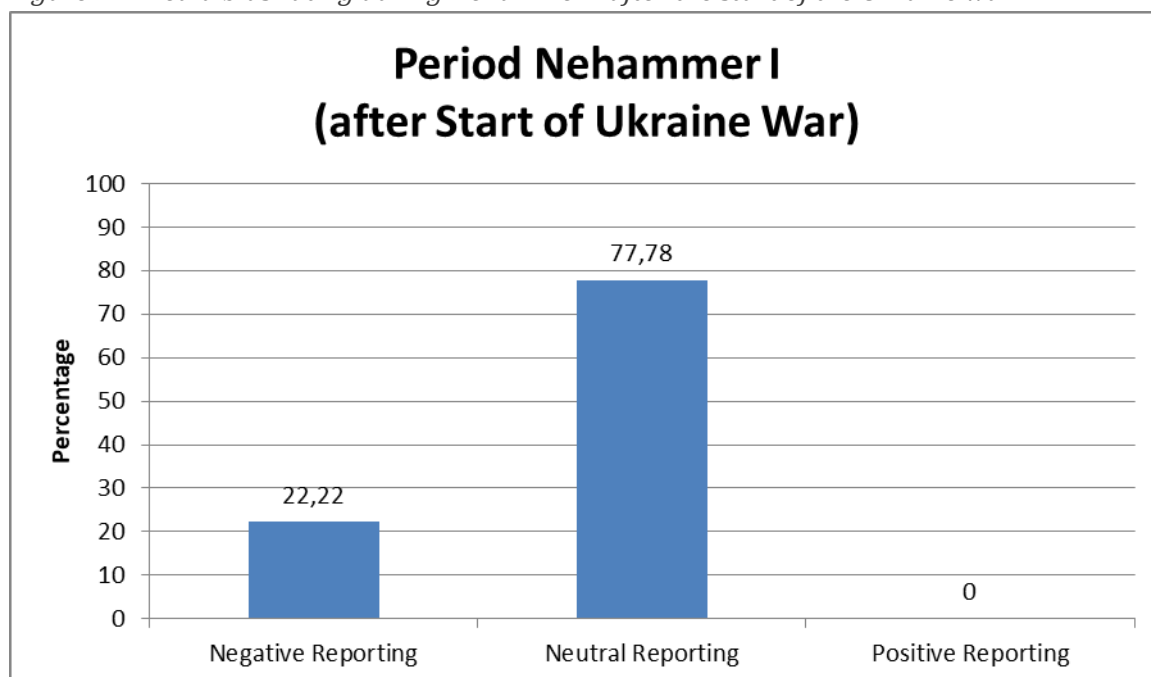
Stats on Articles	Absolute	Relative
Covid-related	4	44,44 %
Migration/EU neighbourhood	2	22,22 %
Austrian-Russian relations	1	11,11 %
EU-wide RT-Prohibition	1	11,11 %
Austrian neutrality as model for Ukraine	1	11,11 %
	9	100 %

Source: own analysis

5.5.3. Media Bias Analysis

The result of the media bias rating is in the following figure 14.

Figure 14: Media bias rating during Nehammer I after the start of the Ukraine war



Source: own analysis

The average media bias rating in this period was 3,67.

(The rating scale went from 0 to 10. $0 \leq x < 4$ was negative, $4 \leq x \leq 6$ was neutral, $6 < x \leq 10$ was positive media bias on the scale.)

H1: RT reports positively on Austrian politics before the Ukraine war.

H2: RT reports negatively on Austrian politics after the start of the Ukraine war.

H1 is not applicable. H2 can be rejected for this period. The reason why the average remained in the negative media bias category was because the articles with a negative media bias were very negative. Especially articles addressing Austrian Russian relations showed Austrian authorities in a humiliating way.

6. Discussion

This discussion section provides a comparative perspective on the five phases/ government periods and how RT reported on them. It reflects the research questions (RQ 1, RQ 1.1, RQ 1.2, RQ 1.3), the hypotheses and discusses what changed over time. Furthermore, it provides a discussion of the theories provided in the theory section of this master thesis in light of the analyzed empirical material.

Each sub-chapter offers a summary of the findings.

The discussion is structured in such a way, that it allows enough deliberation of the research questions as well as the hypotheses.

The central research question RQ 1 (**How does RT depict and position Austrian politics and Austrian-Russian relations throughout the changing governments from Kurz I until after the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war?**) was addressed through the analysis of 97 RT articles in the timeframe from Kurz I to the Nehammer I government period after the beginning of the Ukraine war. The methodological approach applied mixed methods, which helped answer the research question in a more comprehensive way. The discussion will start with the hypotheses in the five phases. It will then address the main research question as well as the sub-questions (RQ 1.1, 1.2, 1.3). Ultimately, the theories introduced in the conceptual framework of analysis are discussed in light of the results.

The sub-questions to the main research question (RQ 1) were developed in order to allow a broad and comprehensive answer to the central research question. The sub-questions are reiterated here:

RQ 1.1: Is there a media bias in RT reporting concerning politics in Austria? If yes, how does media bias in RT reporting express itself?

RQ 1.2: Which actors are mentioned in the chosen government periods?

RQ 1.3: Which topics are mentioned in the chosen government periods?

6.1. Discussion of hypotheses

The research questions RQ 1.1 (**Is there a media bias in RT reporting concerning politics in Austria? If yes, how does media bias in RT reporting express itself?**) is reflected in the two hypotheses. Both hypotheses (H1, H2) were developed with the assumption that RT is an instrument of information warfare, which is applied only with the onset of the Ukraine war, as Austria condemned the attack on the Ukraine and made clear that this is not acceptable (The Economist 2022).

H1: RT reports positively on Austrian politics before the Ukraine war.

H2: RT reports negatively on Austrian politics after the start of the Ukraine war.

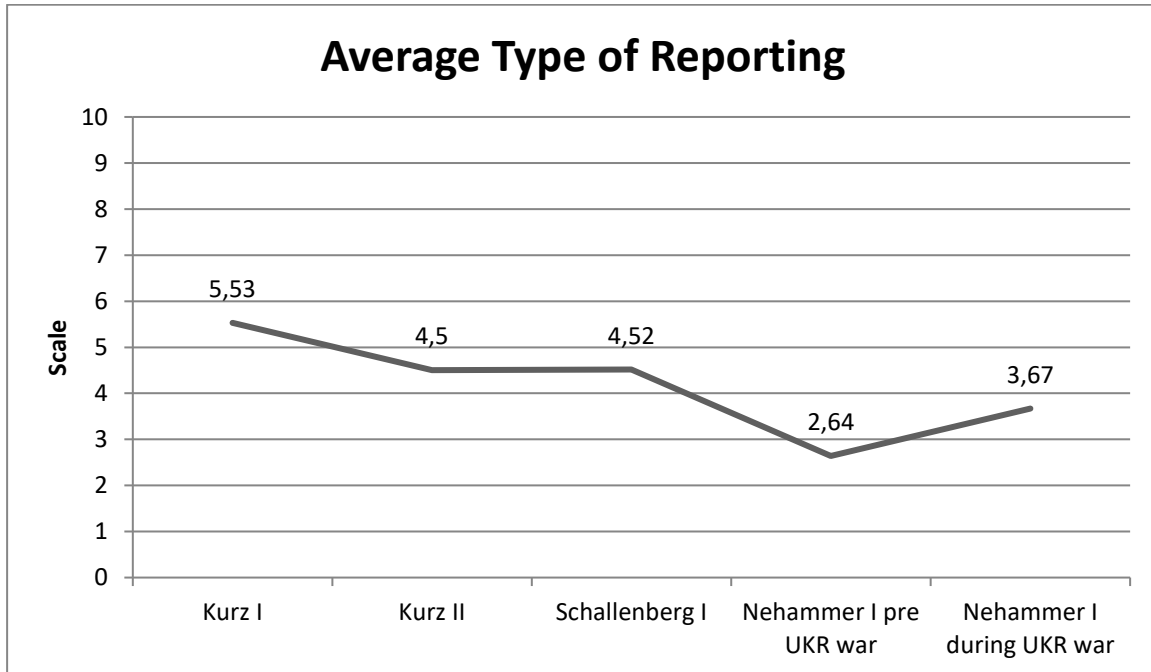
In figure 15 the average media bias rating for each phase is displayed. The hypothesis H1 (**RT reports positively on Austrian politics before the Ukraine war.**) can be rejected for the first four phases (Kurz I, Kurz II, Schallenberg I, Nehammer I before the start of the Ukraine war).

The average type of reporting before the Ukraine war never rises above the level of 6 on the media bias rating scale (which is the threshold for positive reporting). Before the Ukraine war, average reporting remains in the neutral category (4-6), except for Nehammer I before the Ukraine war. During the phase *Nehammer I before the Ukraine war* reporting becomes negative on average (below 4).

The hypothesis H2 (**RT reports negatively on Austrian politics after the start of the Ukraine war**) can be supported in light of the average reporting at the level of 3,67. It is noteworthy that negative reporting on average begins with the Nehammer I government (before the Ukraine war), not with the start of the Ukraine war.

The phase of Nehammer I before the start of the Ukraine war had the most negative average reporting of all the five phases. After the start of the Ukraine war, the average media bias becomes somewhat better, moves from 2,64 to 3,67. However, everything below 4 is considered negative reporting on average.

Figure 15: Average media bias rating over time



Source: own analysis

Bottom line

The hypothesis H1 (**RT reports positively on Austrian politics before the Ukraine war**) is rejected for the entire timespan before the Ukraine war that includes the government phases Kurz I, Kurz II, Schallenberg I, Nehammer I before the start of the Ukraine war. The hypothesis H2 (**RT reports negatively on Austrian politics after the start of the Ukraine war**) is supported because the average reporting during Nehammer I after the start of the Ukraine war remains in the negative reporting category.

On average, RT reporting is neutral in the first three phases and turns negative in the last two phases.

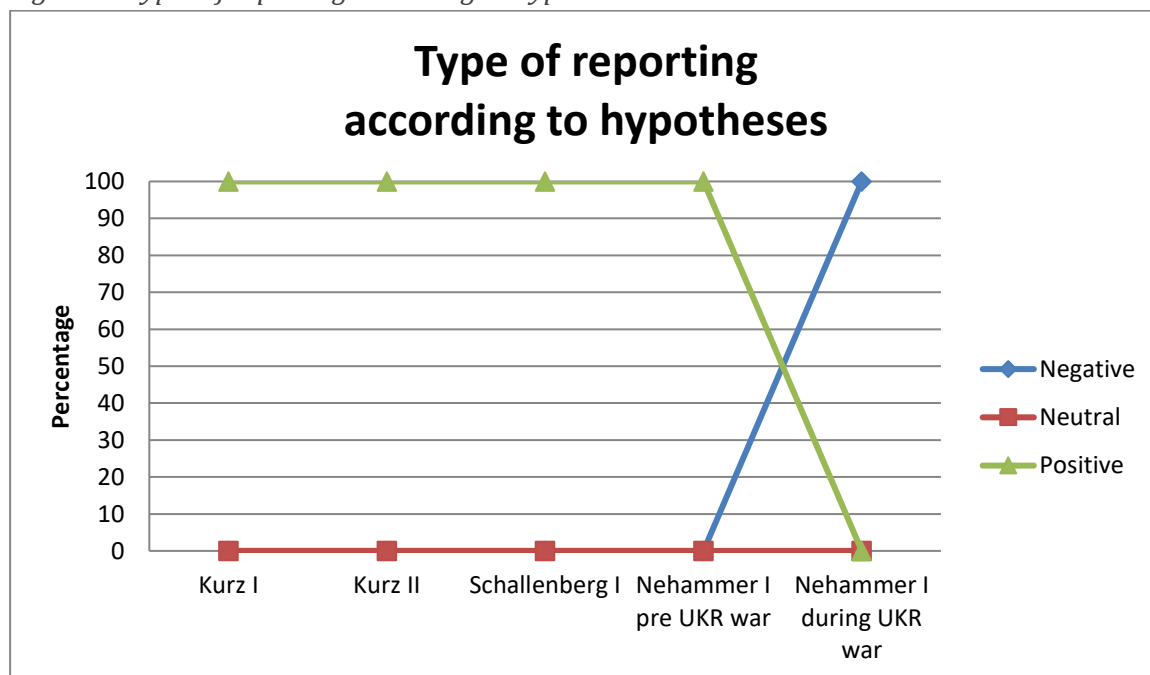
6.1.1. Discussion of positive, neutral and negative reporting categories

As media bias was measured on a scale from 0 to 10, it is worthwhile to discuss the results within each of the media bias categories (negative, neutral and positive). The hypotheses were graphically translated into a figure (in which each line symbolizes one of the categories) in order to allow for more transparency of the results. The following paragraphs discuss the positive, negative and neutral reporting category.

In figure 1, the hypotheses were translated into a line graph. The expected **positive reporting category** (mirroring the hypotheses) remains at 100% in the first four government phases and shifts to 0% in the last phase (after the start of the Ukraine war).

Compared to the actual results in figure 16 (see below), positive reporting is rather low throughout the entire period. During Kurz I, almost a quarter (23,53 %) of the reporting is positive, which is the highest level of all the periods. The subsequent government periods are 0% or close to 0 (4% during Schallenberg I). However, the overall tendency, namely that positive reporting will go down, occurs in both the hypotheses and the empirical results. The main difference is that empirically, positive reporting started off from a very low level (23,53%) (not at 100%) and shifted already in the Kurz II phase to 0 (instead of the last phase of Nehammer I after the start of the Ukraine war).

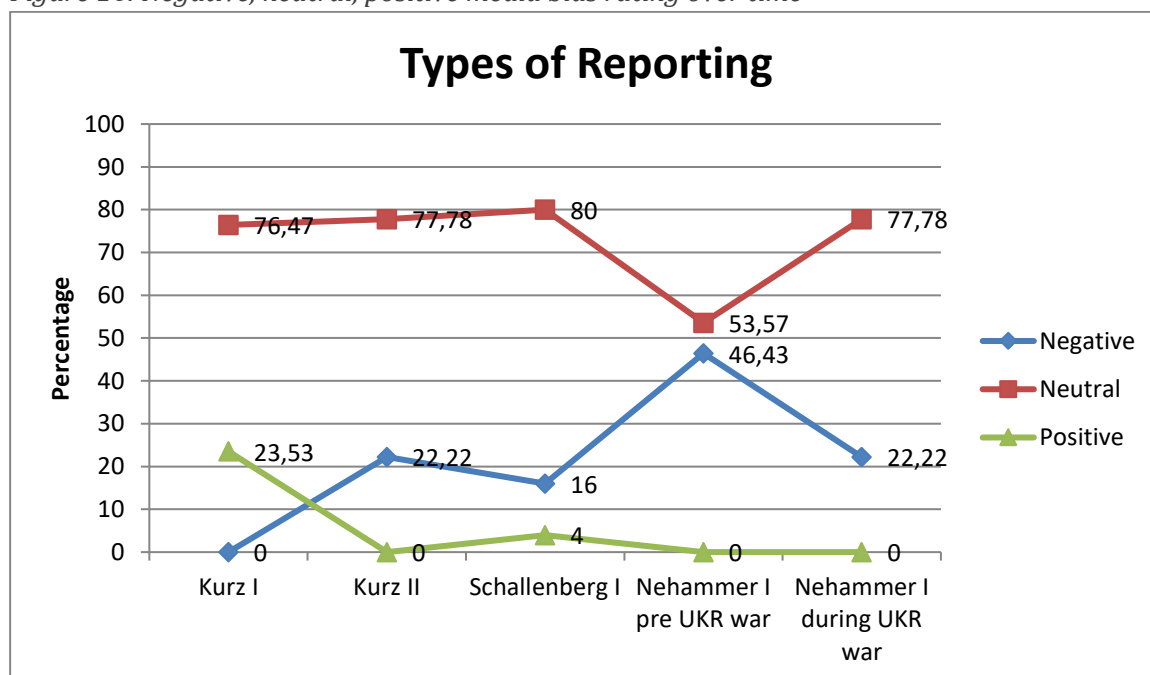
Figure 1: Types of reporting according to hypotheses



Source: own design.

The figure 16 shows the actual results of the rating of all 97 RT articles.

Figure 16: Negative, neutral, positive media bias rating over time



Source: own analysis

The **negative reporting category** according to the hypotheses remained at 0 % in the first 4 phases and shifted to 100 % as of the beginning of the Ukraine war.

Compared to the empirical results, this was off track. The results show that negative reporting starts off at 0 % during Kurz I and peaks during the Nehammer I (before the war) period at 46,43 %. Interestingly, negative reporting drops after the start of the Ukraine war. Both the results and the hypotheses demonstrate that negative reporting was to grow over time. However, the results show that negative reporting grew incrementally and dropped after the start of the Ukraine war (instead of peaking after the start of the Ukraine war).

The **neutral reporting category** was not included in the hypotheses. This meant that the value of this category would remain at 0% throughout the entire time. The results show quite a high level of the neutral reporting category. The actual neutral reporting category remains above 75 % except for the phase Nehammer I before the Ukraine war, in which it drops to 53.57 %.

The **interpretation** could go as follows:

It is unclear, why the negative reporting category shrinks after the start of the Ukraine war. A possible reason is that after the start of the EU ban on RT news in Austria, RT used less effort in regard to reporting on Austria.

The neutral reporting manifested itself through short agency texts. This could have been used in order to establish credibility among readers and make them return to the website.

The highest level of positive reporting occurred during the government Kurz I. This mirrors the peak of positive bilateral relations between Austria and Russia, which was very close during the Kurz I government period.

Bottom-line

Positive reporting occurs most visibly during Kurz I and afterwards it practically vanishes.

Negative reporting grows incrementally from 0 % during Kurz I to its peak during Nehammer I before the war at 46,43 % and drops after the start of the Ukraine war back to 22,22%.

The direction of the expected development and the actual development are the same. The difference lies in the temporal growth and decline in both categories. While the expectation was that only after the start of the Ukraine war, there would be a shift in both positive and negative reporting, the results tell another story. The actual results within the categories move before and after the Ukraine war to a certain extent. The positive category drops right after the Kurz I government. The negative category grows right after the government Kurz I.

Another interesting and unexpected aspect is that the negative category does not peak after the start of the Ukraine war. It peaks before the start of the Ukraine war.

Neutral reporting is not included in the hypotheses, but it explains why the negative and the positive reporting do not occur in the expected amount. RT uses a lot of neutral reports that are relatively short in length.

6.2. Discussion of research questions

While the discussion of the hypotheses address average media bias and very much give an answer to the research question of **“How does RT depict and position Austrian politics and Austrian-Russian relations throughout the changing governments from Kurz I until after the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war?”**, I want to point out that this is not comprehensive enough. Attempting to understand “how” in this master thesis incorporates the “what” question. Comprehensive research about news reporting should not exist merely in the “how”, but very much needs to allow insights into the “what”, the content of the reporting.

This is the very reason a mixed-methods approach combining both quantitative and qualitative methods can be advantageous.

The research question RQ 1.1 (**Is there a media bias in RT reporting concerning politics in Austria? If yes, how does media bias in RT reporting express itself?**) has been reflected in the the chapter **“Discussion of the Hypotheses”**, however this question is also included in the subsequent research questions RQ 1.2 (**How are actors shown within this media bias?**) and RQ 1.3 (**How are topics shown within this media bias?**). For this reason I would like to structure the discussion of research questions first by addressing RQ 1.2 and RQ 1.3 and ultimately discuss RQ 1.1, which includes a short summary of what has been learned from the results.

6.2.1. Assessment of actors in RT

In RQ 1.2 (**How are actors shown within this media bias?**) the methodical approach of the qualitative content analysis offers a deeper insight into the objects of biased media reporting. In each of the five phases a government period has been coded along the four central categories:

- Austrian Government
- Opposition
- Civil Society
- Austrian-Russian Relations

Central actors are discussed here that contributed to either positive or negative media bias.

Austrian government

With the beginning of the covid pandemic, the Austrian government and the civil society are depicted as being on the end of two poles. While the Austrian government applied the rigorous covid-restriction measures, the Austrian civil society took to the streets in order to allegedly protest peacefully as the following citation exemplifies:

“Politicians are once again blaming the unvaccinated. Too few people have been vaccinated. That’s why the government is responding with mandatory vaccination starting in February - without explaining the procedure in more detail”(RT DE, 20 Nov. 2021).

In another instant, RT cites a psychologist that interprets the government’s covid restrictions:

“The Austrian psychologist [Anna Werksnies] asserts: ‘The best strategy to make someone docile, obedient or conforming is simply to scare them. The more fearful a person becomes, the more he or she is willing to do anything to get rid of the powerful emotion of fear.’ At the same time, large groups of people could not find a way out on their own. Masses, she said, depend on a ‘helper’: ‘At that moment, the knight in golden armor should be at the forefront as the deliverer in distress’. To this end, she said, a lot of money is also spent on image consultants, communications experts, chaos architects and lobbyists. The supposed savior has the best chances, she said, when emotionally charged threat scenarios such as ‘waves of refugees’ or the Sars-Cov-2 virus are ‘carried to the masses in a massively polarizing way.’ ” (RT DE, 13 Okt. 2021).

RT used the covid pandemic to draw the Austrian government in a rather negative light. RT made covid measures look like they were going against the will of the population and only following science directives.

In many instances, RT reports neutrally about the covid measures, in which RT merely informs about the measures.

The Austrian government is drawn in a negative light in the context of the covid restrictions.

Opposition

When the parliamentary opposition was mentioned, the FPÖ received more attention than the other parties and was shown in a positive light. The FPÖ is cited for being the only party voting against central laws passing the parliament, such as the covid restriction measures (RT DE, 7 Dez. 2021), the prohibition of RT in Austria (RT DE, 24 Mär. 2022), or the law on assisted suicide (RT DE, 17 Dez. 2021). It is also cited when covid demonstrations occur (RT DE b, 9 Dez. 2021). The SPÖ and the NEOS on the other hand received relatively less attention.

Hence, I would argue that the FPÖ is narrated in such a way, that it is the only “true” opposition, compared to all other parties.

The FPÖ is drawn in a positive light.
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Civil Society

Civil society was often portrayed through demonstrations. Demonstrations during the covid pandemic were reported on frequently. RT portrays the covid demonstrations as an expression of freedom of speech and as the will of the people in the context of the covid pandemic. This is exemplified by the following citations:

“In addition to high numbers of Corona-positive patients, the political situation in Austria is increasingly escalating. Lockdown and compulsory vaccination seem to have been the straw that broke the camel's back for many: In addition to the FPÖ, parts of the Austrian Armed Forces also promoted the protest march in Vienna on Saturday”(RT DE, 20 Nov. 2021).

“The measure [mandatory vaccinations, E.S.] proved unpopular in Austrian society and sparked mass protests across the country, with tens of thousands of people speaking out in favor of a voluntary decision to vaccinate. Meanwhile, the number of new infections in Austria stands at 10,478”(RT DE, 29 Nov. 2021).

Covid demonstrations are drawn in a positive light.
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Media

Part of the category of civil society was media. As of the government Schallenberg I period onwards, RT writes about Austrian and Western media in a very hostile manner. RT argues that Austrian media are negatively biased against Russia and even call them aggressive against Russia. This is exemplified by following citation:

"The more severe the situation is in a specific country, the more aggressive the media campaign against Russia. Austrian reporters from Moscow no longer write in black and white. They have agreed to write 'and with Russians the situation is even worse' "(RT DE, 14 Feb. 2022).

Austrian media is drawn in a negative light.

Austrian Russian Relations

Strictly speaking, Austrian-Russian relations are not an actor. However, the category is used to capture the actors Austria and Russia in the realm of international relations, namely in their bilateral relations. The actors related to this issue are the Austrian and the Russian Foreign Affairs authorities.

Austrian-Russian relations are only mentioned as of the government period of Nehammer I , both before and after the start of the Ukraine war. A common thread is that Austria is considered to be siding with the “West”, when Russia officially recognized the breakaway People’s Republics in Eastern Ukraine, as Austria supported the EU sanctions against Russia (RT DE, 22 Feb. 2022). After the start of the Ukraine war in 2022, Austria is even considered hostile towards Russia as it sides with the “West” (RT DE, 24 Mai 2023). Austria’s position of neutrality is questioned in RT reporting regarding Austrian-Russian relations to the point that Austria is not viewed as neutral. Furthermore, Austrian-Russian relations are reported on as characterized by diplomatic tension (RT DE, 26 Jan. 2022).

Austrian Russian relations are drawn in a negative light.
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Bottom line

The political actors drawn in a negative light in RT reporting are:

- The Austrian government in the context of the covid restrictions.
- The Austrian government in their bilateral relations to Russia.
- The Austrian media.

The political actors drawn in a positive light in RT reporting are:

- The civil society that came together in demonstrations against the covid restrictions.
- The populist right party FPÖ (Freiheitliche Partei Österreich).

6.2.2. Assessment of topics in RT

The last research question RQ 1.3 (**How are topics shown within this media bias?**) takes a quantitative approach in order to display the overall diversity of issues and media agenda setting. Trying to analyze each issue RT reported on in the 5 year span of the sample would exceed the scope of this master thesis and would not even be necessary in order to address this research question.

In each of the sub-chapters of the chapter “**5. Analyses of Government Phases**” a table of frequency was displayed (see Tables 1, 2, 3, 4, 5). Making the overall number and relative percentages of issues transparent is important in order to understand how media bias might work beyond the negative and positive reporting through media agenda setting.

Thematic diversity declined considerably over time (see Table 6). In both Kurz government periods (Kurz I and Kurz II) the number of topics is at around 10. During Schallenberg I and Nehammer I (in both phases) the number of topics shrinks to around 5 topics. Covid-related news as of Schallenberg I are dominating the reporting of RT. Except for Kurz I, the most frequent issue reported on is covid-related. This is an indication for media bias.

The Kurz I period showed 9 different topics in the reporting. The most reported topic were “*Austrian relations to EU-neighbours*”, due to Sebastian Kurz’ visits to Germany and France. This most frequent topic received an overall attention of 27, 8 % of all articles.

The Kurz II period showed 11 different topics in the reporting. The most reported topic was covid-related. This most frequent topic received an overall attention of 22, 2 %.

The Schallenberg I period showed 6 different topics in the reporting. The most reported topic was covid-related, with an overall share of 72 %.

The Nehammer I period before the Ukraine war only showed 4 different topics. The most reported topic was – again – covid-related, with an overall share of 78,6 %.

At last, the Nehammer I period after the start of the Ukraine war showed 5 different topics , with the most frequent one (covid-related) receiving 44,44 % of attention.

Table 6: Most frequent topics in articles over time

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Most frequent topic</i>	<i>Share of most frequent topic in reporting</i>	<i>Number of topics</i>
Kurz I	Austrian relations to EU neighbours	27,8 %	9
Kurz II	Covid-related	22,2 %	11
Schallenberg I	Covid-related	72 %.	6
Nehammer I before Ukraine war	Covid-related	78,6 %.	4
Nehammer I after start Ukraine war	Covid-related	44,44 %	5

Source: own analysis

Media bias is not only defined by leaving out facts, or when arguments are weighed in a specific way, but by agenda setting / choice of topics in reporting (Entman 2007; Im Winkel 2015). The latter has been occurring in the case of RT reporting on Austria since Schallenberg I.

Bottom line

The number of topics declines dramatically over time in RT news on Austrian politics. During the phases Kurz I and Kurz II the number of topics is on average at around 10, the average drops to around 5 in the phases Schallenberg I and Nehammer I before and after the start of the Ukraine war. News related to the covid pandemic was the most reported topic since the government phase Kurz II. The highest share of covid-related news is reached during *Nehammer I before the Ukraine war*, with 78,6 % of all news articles pertaining to this issue.

The most biased phase in regard to media agenda setting is arguably the government period *Nehammer I before the Ukraine war* as it assembles the lowest number of overall topics (4) and the highest share of attention of the most reported topic, which was *covid-related* and reached 78,6% of all articles.

6.2.3. Final Assessment of media bias

Returning to the research question RQ 1.1 (**Is there a media bias in RT reporting concerning politics in Austria? If yes, how does media bias in RT reporting express itself?**), it can be ascertained there is ample evidence of media bias in RT reporting concerning politics in Austria. Media bias in RT reporting on Austrian politics develops dynamically in the time from Kurz I to after the start of the war in the Ukraine. On average, media bias turns negative as of the phase *Nehammer I before the start of the war* onwards. After the start of the war in the Ukraine, the media bias remains negative.

Media bias develops especially in regard to specific actors in Austrian politics. RT reporting portrays actors in a positive and negative light. What constitutes positive or negative reporting is a subtle matter. Positive reporting could occur through reporting without any form of criticism and in an embellishing way, for example. Negative reporting could occur through allowing much criticism of specific actors.

Ultimately, RT draws a positive light of the demonstrations against the covid restrictions as well as the FPÖ, the Austrian populist right party.

The actors that RT depicts in a negative light are the Austrian government in light of the covid restrictions and in the context of the Austrian-Russian bilateral relations. Another actor RT positions in a negative light is the Austrian media.

Given the exploratory nature of the media bias rating scale and the fact that there is no consensus over what constitutes “neutral” reporting, the measured findings are understood as an innovative approximation of media bias.

Nevertheless, media bias also occurs in RT reporting through the choice and frequency of topics. In the first two phases (Kurz I, II) the number of topics is at around ten (10). In the last three phases (Schallenberg I, Nehammer I before and after the start of the Ukraine war) the number of topics is at around five (5). Furthermore, the issue of covid-related news dominates the news as of Schallenberg I onwards. In the most extreme phase (Nehammer I before the start of the Ukraine war) Covid-related news made up 78,6 % of all RT news reporting on Austrian politics.

Bottom line

The research questions can be answered with pointing to the dynamic development of media bias as the central aspect of reporting on Austrian politics in the RT news outlet.

Media bias is clearly present in RT reporting. It presents itself in average media bias turning negative as of *Nehammer I* (both phases) onwards, in depicting specific actors in a negative and positive light as well as through the choice and frequency of topics (agenda setting).

The most negatively biased phase was *Nehammer I before the Ukraine war*, both on the media bias scale and in the agenda setting aspect.

6.3. Discussion of theories

The discussion of theories contextualizes the results that were illustrated in the chapters discussing the hypotheses and the research questions. This part of the thesis builds on the findings.

On average, RT reporting is neutral in the first three phases and turns negative in the last two phases.

Information war is a relatively broad field that can potentially encompass various elements. Hence, it is difficult to pin down. Information can be used in such a way, that it furthers uncertainty/mistrust about democratic institutions in a targeted society. This information can flow in different formats, media information is one of them. Psychological operations are an element of information war, that use traditional media outlets or social media news. It is also called “information-psychological war” and occurs both in peace and war times. The aim can be to nudge the public opinion and perception of certain actors and issues. Ultimately, it isn’t clear what the goals of information wars are as they aren’t publicly declared (Snegovaya 2015; Lucas & Pomeranzev 2016: 5; The International Institute for Strategic Studies 2015).

An aspect of information war can also be so-called “active measures”. These can be about shaping policies of foreign nations, eroding trust in the establishment and leading figures, irritating international relations of targeted countries; discrediting non-governmental or governmental opponents of Russia in foreign countries (Lucas & Pomeranzev 2016).

In the case of RT reporting about Austrian politics, I have encountered a dynamic shift in media bias. The media bias becomes negative not long before the start of the Ukraine war and remains negative during the phase after the start of the Ukraine war. This shouldn’t be viewed as a coincidence given that the Ukraine war is a critical juncture in international affairs. Information war began before the start of the Ukraine war.

Central aspects of RT reporting fall into active measures. The element of eroding trust in the establishment and leading figures is fulfilled with the negative bias towards the Austrian government in the field of covid measures as well as in bilateral relations to Russia. It discredits the Austrian status of neutrality as well as the Austrian media. The clear positive depiction of covid demonstrators as well as the populist right FPÖ is an indication that RT promotes polarization. Taken together, one can speak of information war tactics reflected in RT reporting on Austrian politics. The strategic interest of supporting them could be to add to societal division, subsequently furthering de-stabilization of democratic culture from within Austria.

Sharp power is defined as the power to manipulate strategically, and “pierce, penetrate, or perforate” the political landscape of democratic nations to ultimately weaken them (Walker 2016: 12). This occurs when we can analyze the impact of RT in actual democracy. This, however, is beyond the scope of this master thesis. What the empirical analysis has demonstrated is rather, how RT attempts to do so.

This is also where the approach of **applied postmodernism** enters the discussion and interpretation of the results. Strategically placed doubt about the legitimacy of the government’s actions occurred often in the context of covid-restriction measures. Furthermore, doubt is cast when RT reports on Austrian media. They are viewed as especially critical against Russia. Doubt against the legitimacy of the actions of the government is reinforced in the reporting on demonstrations against covid measures, where the governments’ ultimate aim (health of the people) is questioned.

Interpreting RT reporting in regard to **knowledge democracy**, one could argue, the knowledge produced through RT informs citizens on how to feel about their own government, about the media, but also about what is considered to be a problem in Austria. Central to knowledge democracy are two relationships reflected in RT reporting. First, the government-society relationship and second, the media-society relationship are addressed in RT reporting. Both relationships are attacked in RT reporting. The Austrian government and the media are depicted in a negative light, with potential repercussions. Those repercussions could lead to eroding trust in democratically elected officials and established media outlets. The latter produces political knowledge necessary in order to vote in democratic elections according to one’s own interests. If voters stop consuming news, voting according to one’s interest might become more challenging.

Strategic narratives have been used in order to create “*a shared meaning of the past, present, and future*” in order to “*shape the behavior of domestic and international actors*” (Miskimmon et al 2013: 2). Three levels of strategic narratives are distinguished. International systems narratives aim to create a picture of how the global order works and how individual actors within this order are characterized. National narratives generate a picture of a country or nation, its values and ultimate aims. Issue narratives address policies and why a certain policy is important (or not) (Miskimmon et al. 2018: 4).

In regard to International Systems narratives, the RT reporting on Austria does not offer much indication on how to perceive global order. Nevertheless, Austria is regarded as part of the West, and no longer as a neutral state after the start of the Ukraine war (RT DE, 24 Mai 2023). This is due to the condemnation of the Ukraine war by Austrian officials (The Economist 2022). It isn't indicated what the West stands for in reports on Austrian politics. In the logic of a narrative, the past was neutral, the present (at the time of reporting) is not any longer.

A national or identity narrative is constructed pertaining to the Austrian government, which is depicted negatively in regard to the covid pandemic and Austrian Russian bilateral relations. Especially after Sebastian Kurz is no longer in office, the Austrian government is equated to tough covid restriction measures (see chapter 5). Here, the national narrative of the Austrian government and the issue narrative of the covid measures intertwine.

The actors within the issue narrative on the covid pandemic are the government on the one side and the people on the other side. RT emphasizes the role of demonstrations by reporting frequently and in-depth on them. They are considered as demonstrating the will of the people. RT reports frequently on disciplinary consequences of those who demonstrate in their role as professionals, such as soldiers, police men, medical doctors and pharmacists. The government here is allegedly facilitating a culture, in which freedom of speech is no longer possible without having to face disciplinary consequences, hence it being reduced. Doubts are cast repeatedly in regard to the legitimacy of what the government is imposing on its society. This is exemplified by reports on doctors who are portrayed as haggling with each other over mandatory vaccination (RT DE, 15 Dez. 2021). Ultimately, resistance against covid measures is viewed as legitimate against the backdrop of what the government has been imposing. The narrative draws the picture of a past that is no longer, a past that was free, a present that isn't anymore, and the future seems uncertain.

A smaller identity narrative is also created, namely in regard to the populist right party FPÖ. The populist right FPÖ is viewed as the only “true” opposition that also demonstrates against the covid measures (RT DE b, 9 Dez. 2021) and frequently is the only party that votes against all the other parties in parliament, such as the covid restriction measures (RT DE, 7 Dez. 2021), the prohibition of RT in Austria (RT DE, 24 Mär. 2022), or the law on assisted suicide (RT DE, 17 Dez. 2021).

A weaponized narrative is embedded in a context of information war and can be used as a *“strategy of (dis)information and psychological operations that create or exploit the adversary’s vulnerabilities to cognitive influence (hacking or attacking)[...]. [...] [T]he narrative weaponization strategy entails distinct narrational contestation (counter-narratives), narrational offensive or counter-offensive campaigns as well as, in extreme cases, discursive subversion and character assassination”* (Tyushka 2022: 120).

All the narratives offered here are embedded in already existing disputes in the Austrian society. The question whether Austria has remained neutral since the beginning of the Ukraine war, the covid restriction measures and especially the mandatory vaccination as well as the populist right party FPÖ have been important sources of polarization within Austrian society. RT reporting has drawn on these disputes. The narratives show a form of *“distinct narrational contestation (counter-narratives)”* (Tyushka 2022: 120) of mainstream positions within a polarizing debate.

Mainstream positions arguably would be: Austria has remained neutral also after the start of the Ukraine war, the covid restriction measures were necessary in order to prevent a higher death rate due to covid and the populist right party FPÖ is not the voice of the people.

7. Conclusion

The news outlet RT, formerly Russia Today, has been an international player in global news diffusion. The Russian state has funded RT with a considerable amount of money in order to offer viewers around the world an alternative to their home-grown media. However, RT has been considered to be a tool of information warfare, to irritate Western information environments by offering news that polarize, produce bias or confuse. Research on how RT reporting depicted foreign countries has been done for several Western cases. One case has been missing: Austria. This master thesis intended to fill this gap. Austria is especially interesting as it moved from having close ties to Russia to diplomatic tensions since the beginning of the Ukraine war. Simultaneously, Austria has permanently remained its neutrality in the time period scrutinized in this thesis. The main research question was: **How does the Russian state-backed media outlet “RT” depict and position Austrian politics and Austrian-Russian relations throughout the changing governments from Kurz I until after the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war?**

Before the analysis, this thesis provided various theories in order to facilitate understanding of the context of RT reporting. Here, information warfare, strategic narratives, sharp power, postmodernism as well as knowledge democracy were introduced.

In order address the research question I chose a timeframe that captured the change in bilateral relations between Austria and Russia. The timeframe was limited to 2017 to 2023, including the government periods Kurz I, Kurz II, Schallenberg I, Nehammer I before the Ukraine war and Nehammer I after the start of the war. I applied two hypotheses to all five phases of analysis:

H1: RT reports positively on Austrian politics before the Ukraine war.

H2: RT reports negatively on Austrian politics after the start of the Ukraine war.

I sampled a total of 97 articles off the german speaking RT news site from all five phases, and used a mixed methods approach. First, I applied a structured qualitative content analysis. I coded the articles along the following categories:

- Austrian Government
- Opposition
- Civil Society
- Austrian-Russian Relations

I then used an explorative rating scale I created to measure media bias within RT reporting on Austrian politics over time. Additionally, I displayed the frequency and overall variety of topics in RT reporting offering insights into agenda setting.

The hypotheses were tested with the media bias rating scale for each government period. The results of the other methodical approaches were used to answer the research questions in more depth.

In the discussion chapter I address and discuss the hypotheses, the research questions as well as the theories in light of the findings for the entire timespan. H1 was rejected for the first four phases. H2 was supported for the fifth phase.

The average media bias rating shows that RT reports neutrally during the governments Kurz I, Kurz II and Schallenberg I. It reports negatively during the last two phases of Nehammer I (before and after the start of the Ukraine war).

The central research question (**RQ 1: How does the Russian state-backed media outlet “RT” depict and position Austrian politics and Austrian-Russian relations throughout the changing governments from Kurz I until after the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war?**) can be answered with pointing to the dynamic development of media bias as a central aspect of reporting on Austrian politics in the RT news outlet.

Media bias is clearly present in RT reporting. It presents itself in average media bias turning negative as of Nehammer I (both phases), in depicting specific actors in a negative or positive way as well as through the choice and frequency of topics (agenda setting).

The most negatively biased phase was *Nehammer I before the start of the Ukraine war*, both on the media bias scale and in the agenda setting aspect.

Regarding how RT depicted specific actors the following was discovered. The Austrian government in the context of Austrian Russian relations, the covid restriction measures and the Austrian media are shown in a negative light in RT reporting. The populist right FPÖ and the covid demonstrators are shown in a positive light. Austrian neutrality is questioned after the start of the Ukraine war within RT reporting.

The results support the notion that information war tactics are at play in RT reporting. RT has attempted to contribute to polarization in Austrian society by casting doubt about the legitimacy of the Austrian government, Austrian media as well as on its neutral status towards the readership of RT DE.

This master thesis can serve as a basis for further inquiry into researching RT in general and specifically in regard to Austria. The results of the methods of the qualitative content analysis as well as the media bias rating scale would benefit from more than one coder. The quality and the further development of the results could advance overall reliability and validity with more coders. Furthermore, I would invite research on how narratives on RT and narratives in other publications in regard to the covid pandemic in Austria appear to be similar. I would also invite others to closer research the interlinkages between bilateral relations to Russia and media bias within RT reporting in regard to other Western and non-Western countries.

7. Fazit

Die russische Nachrichtenplattform RT, ehemals Russia Today, ist ein internationaler Akteur in der globalen Welt der Nachrichten. Der russische Staat finanziert RT mit erheblichen Geldsummen, um Menschen auf der ganzen Welt eine Alternative zu ihren heimischen Medienprodukten zu bieten. Allerdings gilt RT auch als Instrument des russischen Staats, die westliche Informationslandschaft zu irritieren, indem Nachrichten geliefert werden, die zur Polarisierung beitragen, Vorurteile bestärken oder einfach verwirren. In der Forschung wurden schon mehrere westliche Fälle untersucht, in denen nachgezeichnet wurde, wie RT-Berichte das westliche Ausland darstellten. Ein Fall fehlte aber: Österreich. Diese Masterarbeit beabsichtigt diese Lücke zu schließen. Der Fall Österreich ist besonders interessant, weil die russisch-österreichischen Beziehungen einen dynamischen Wandel hingelegt haben. Von einst sehr engen Beziehungen während der Kurz I Regierung hin zu diplomatischen Spannungen seit dem Beginn des Ukraine-Krieges.

Die zentrale Forschungsfrage ist: **Wie stellt das russische staatliche Nachrichtenmedium „RT“ die österreichische Politik und die österreichisch-russischen Beziehungen im Zeitverlauf wechselnder Regierungen seit der Regierung Kurz I bis nach dem Beginn des Ukrainekrieges dar?**

Vor der Analyse wurden Theorien vorgestellt, die kontextualisieren und eine vertiefte Auseinandersetzung mit der Problematik ermöglichen. Es wurden der Informationskrieg, strategische Narrative, soft und sharp power, der Postmodernismus sowie die Knowledge Democracy vorgestellt.

Um die Forschungsfrage zu beantworten, habe ich einen Zeitraum gewählt, der die Veränderungen in den bilateralen Beziehungen zwischen Österreich und Russland erfasst. Daher wurde er auf die Jahre von 2017 bis 2023 begrenzt. Dieser Rahmen umfasst die Regierungsphasen der Regierungen Kurz I, Kurz II, Schallenberg I, Nehammer I vor dem Ukraine-Krieg, Nehammer I nach dem Beginn des Ukraine-Krieges.

Ich habe zwei Hypothesen aufgestellt, die auf alle der fünf genannten Phasen getestet wurden.

H1: RT reports positively on Austrian politics before the Ukraine war.

H2: RT reports negatively on Austrian politics after the start of the Ukraine war.

Insgesamt habe ich 97 RT-Artikel von der deutschsprachigen RT-Nachrichtenseite gesammelt und einen Mixed-Methods-Ansatz verwendet.

Zunächst habe ich eine strukturierende qualitative Inhaltsanalyse durchgeführt. Zentrale Kategorien, die beim Codier-Prozess anleitend waren, sind:

- Österreichische Regierung
- Opposition
- Gesellschaft
- Österreichisch-Russische Beziehungen

Anschließend habe ich eine von mir entwickelte explorative Medienbias-Bewertungsskala verwendet, um den Medienbias in der RT-Berichterstattung hinsichtlich österreichischer Politik im Zeitverlauf zu messen. Darüber hinaus habe ich die Häufigkeit und Vielfalt der Themen in der RT-Berichterstattung nachgezeichnet, um Aussagen über das Agenda-Setting treffen zu können.

Die Hypothesen wurden mittels der Bewertungsskala für jede der fünf Phasen getestet. Die Ergebnisse der anderen methodischen Zugänge wurden für die vertiefende Beantwortung der Forschungsfragen herangezogen.

Im Diskussions-Kapitel habe ich Hypothesen, Forschungsfragen sowie die Theorien im Licht der Ergebnisse im gesamten untersuchten Zeitverlauf behandelt und abschließend diskutiert. Die Hypothese H1 konnte für die ersten vier Phasen widerlegt werden. Hypothese H2 konnte für die fünfte Phase unterstützt werden.

Die Ergebnisse auf der Medienbias-Skala zeigen, dass RT während der Regierungen Kurz I, Kurz II und Schallenberg I durchschnittlich neutral berichtete. In den Phasen Nehammer I vor und nach dem Start des Ukraine-Krieges berichtete RT durchschnittlich negativ über Österreich.

Die zentrale Forschungsfrage (**RQ 1: How does the Russian state-backed media outlet “RT” depict and position Austrian politics and Austrian-Russian relations throughout the changing governments from Kurz I until after the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war?**) konnte mit dem Verweis auf die dynamische Entwicklung von Medienbias als zentralem Aspekt der Berichterstattung über die österreichische Politik im Nachrichtenmedium RT beantwortet werden.

Medienbias ist in der RT-Berichterstattung eindeutig vorhanden. Er zeigt sich in der durchschnittlich negativen Ausrichtung des Medienbias ab Nehammer I (beide Phasen), in der

negativen und positiven Darstellung bestimmter Akteurinnen und Akteuren sowie in der Auswahl und Häufigkeit der Themen (Agenda Setting).

Die negativste Phase war *Nehammer I vor dem Beginn des Ukraine-Krieges*, sowohl auf der Medienbias-Skala als auch im Hinblick auf das Agenda-Setting.

Hinsichtlich der Darstellung von spezifischen Akteurinnen und Akteuren konnte Folgendes nachgewiesen werden. Die österreichische Regierung wird in der RT-Berichterstattung im Kontext ihrer bilateralen Beziehungen zu Russland sowie der restriktiven Maßnahmen der Covid-Pandemie in einem negativen Licht dargestellt. Dasselbe gilt auch für die österreichischen Medien. Die rechtspopulistische FPÖ und die Covid-Demonstrantinnen und Demonstranten werden in den RT-Berichten in einem positiven Licht dargestellt. Die österreichische Neutralität wird in den RT-Nachrichten nach dem Ausbruch des Ukraine-Krieges in Frage gestellt.

Die Ergebnisse unterstützen die Annahme, dass in der RT-Berichterstattung Informationskriegstaktiken angewendet werden. RT hat versucht, zur Polarisierung der österreichischen Gesellschaft beizutragen und Zweifel an der Legitimität der österreichischen Regierung, der österreichischen Medien sowie der österreichischen Neutralität zu wecken.

Diese Masterarbeit kann als Grundlage für weitere Forschungen zu RT im Allgemeinen sowie speziell in Bezug auf Österreich dienen. Die Methodenkombination stellt einen innovativen Zugang dar, profitiert in Zukunft aber von der Anwendung durch mehrere Kodierende. Die Qualität der Ergebnisse könnte durch die Anwendung und Weiterentwicklung durch mehrere Kodierende insgesamt gesteigert werden.

Darüber hinaus wäre es interessant zu untersuchen, inwieweit Narrative auf RT und Narrative in anderen Publikationen in Österreich einander im Hinblick auf die Covid-Pandemie ähneln. Außerdem würde ich weitere Forschung begrüßen, die das Verhältnis zwischen bilateralen Beziehungen zu Russland und Medienbias auf RT bezüglich anderer westlicher und nicht-westlicher Staaten näher untersucht.

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