

THESIS EVALUATION “Discourses on Russian food embargo 2014 to the European countries in the Russian and European mass media”

The thesis does survey the major theoretical works on social construction of reality and possible methods to research socially constructed phenomena at the level of language. Yet, I do not quite understand why one needs to borrow particular tools from the works published in the 1960s, if every other interpretivist research article in contemporary journals employs these and similar tools. Further to this, the theoretical part could have been better fine-tuned with the analysis of selected sources. It seems to me that the author could have carried out the same research without much of what was mentioned in theoretical parts. Some theories, briefly described, were just listed, whereas normally a reader would have expected to see every theory mentioned tailored to further analysis.

The author used relevant literature. Yet, some important works were overlooked by the author. One of the most obvious omissions is the book “Targeted Sanctions” edited by Thomas Biersteker. If this had been taken into account, the author would not have rushed into conclusion about the absence of means to assess the effectiveness of sanctions, their failure or obsolescence. Biersteker, for instance, argues that there are different goals in applying sanctions and usually targeted sanctions are pretty effective when they are aimed at signaling that a certain behavior is not acceptable.

The conclusions are drawn from the author's analysis. However, at the end of the study the author arrived at something we already know. The author finds that the coverage of food embargo is very politicized. But would anyone expect anything else, if food embargo is a foreign policy means introduced to retaliate for the Western sanctions imposed on Russia in the context of events in the Ukraine? The author notes that in the Russian media the coverage is more or less uniform and supportive of Russian policy. But who would expect the state-owned news agency to offer a different perspective? The author concludes that the western media are more ambivalent in their coverage of the problem in the sense of offering competing opinions on the subject. But this is, after all, a textbook definition of how independent media should work by allowing an alternative opinion. My recommendation for the author would be to highlight in the conclusion on the novel and unexpected findings of the study, going beyond the claims about the biased construction of perspectives on subjects of political concern.

The strength of this thesis lies with an original and appealing topic. The author also undertook an original study of primary material and thus was able to ground her conclusions in empirical observations. While analysing the rhetoric of media coverage, the author develops original categories of “villains” and “victims” that help to capture and classify prevailing images in mainstream media. I very much appreciate a classification table designed by author on the basis of what she discovered in the material. It is very helpful.

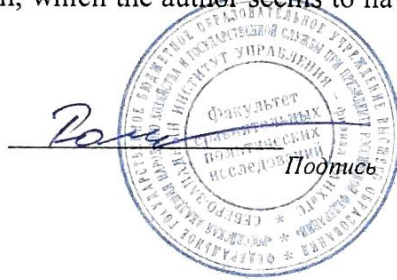
The weakness of the thesis was programmed by the formulation of research question. The author was interested in the ways discourses are constructed. Thus, in the end the thesis reiterated the usual observations on the nature of political discourse, strategies of framing, rhetoric and language games. The problem with this formulation of the research question is that it is too broad. The author seems to have realised this and decided that one media would be sufficient to represent national discourses on the subject of food embargo. This is unjustified: if the author chose non-state media in Russia she would have soon discovered a greater heterogeneity of opinion and styles than that displayed at the TASS agency. Likewise, in the UK the BBC is undoubtedly the most authoritative sources but simply discarding the Daily Mail, Sky News, the Telegraph and Guardian creates a significant bias.

Another weakness of this work is in its justification of case selection. The author wished to check the correlation between the volume of commentaries on food embargo and trade with Russia. If that were the purpose, why did the author choose to look at trade in absolute numbers, instead of the share of trade with Russia in the overall volume of international trade? The share of agricultural products sold to Russia in the overall trade of the Eastern European countries and Finland is significantly greater than that in Western Europe. Therefore, it is unclear why would one want to look at Germany, for the economy of which Russian food embargo is relatively harmless.

Overall, the thesis is structured according to the tasks formulated in the introduction.

While the author's narrative is generally clear, further polishing of the English prose would be necessary to avoid confusion of the reader. The problem becomes particularly acute at the stage of conclusion, which the author seems to have written hastily and saved time on proof-reading.

June 8, 2017



Evgeny N. Roshchin

ФИО