Disinformation and Manipulation Campaigns on Social Media

Master Thesis

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1 Introduction and Research Question

Diffusing misinformation and fake news online give rise to worldwide concerns (Vis, 2014). Especially during the 2016 US Presidential Election and the BREXIT referendum, the apprehension of so called "Fake News" – fabricated news, which demand to be true, occurred. This fake news can appear in different forms, as conspiracy theories, unsubstantiated rumours or false information and are now part of the contemporary media system (Shin, Jian , & Driscoll, 2018). As decision making processes in open societies and democracies heavily depend on reliable information, misinformation and manipulation are already considered as security threats by national governments. Thomas De Maiziére, the former minister for the interior of Germany stated:

> "By deliberately targeting institutions of democratic will formation, such cyber-attacks pose a new dimension of threat. If they succeed, I see long-term threats to the liberal society and our democracy. "Thomas De Maizière (BSI, 2016, S. 3) [1]

In that context, information on social media platforms became a serious matter for democratic societies, security actors and governmental institutions. The fear of social media manipulation also circulated around the governmental elections in Germany in 2017. Events like the case of "Lisa from Berlin" a 17-year-old girl, which was supposedly raped by refugees in 2016, was utilized by social media news channels to mobilize parts of the society against the refugee policy of the German government. In the end, it turned out, that the girl was not raped and she just stayed over by a friend. Dozens of protests already occurred (Schacht, 2016).

In the age of information warfare, foreign states exactly abuse this vulnerability of open societies, by causing confusion through spreading misinformation. This process aims to hamper or influence political decisions of one state to the advantage of another state, from which the misinformation originated (Roger C. Molander, 2018).

Due to this relevance, this research investigates organized social media misinformation and manipulation campaigns of foreign news channels in Germany.

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[1] „Indem sie gezielt Einrichtungen der demokratischen Willensbildung ins Visier nehmen, stehen solche Cyber-Angriffe für eine neue Dimension an Bedrohung. Haben sie Erfolg, sehe ich langfristig Gefahren für die freiheitliche Gesellschaft und unsere Demokratie."[1] Thomas De Maiziére

The question researched in this thesis is: to which extent the Russian state sponsored social media channel Sputnik Deutschland, utilized stylistic methods, pictures, and rhetorical techniques in their media coverage on Facebook during the time of the coalition building process in Germany in 2018, and could this be classified as manipulative attempts to shape the public discourse about political topics connected to the coalition building process.

The aim is to find out, if patterns of manipulation can be discerned in articles published on social media. By far the most important social media platform in Germany is Facebook, with more than 32 million users. Social media manipulation on Facebook is also very relevant, as more and more young people prefer to use this platform instead of conventional media types (BSI, 2016) (Facebook, 2017). In addition, the research focuses on a relevant foreign government founded news channel, which is frequently publishing in German language.

Media channels, financed by foreign governments, are not new. Already in 1942 the TV channel Voice of America has been established, which was almost worldwide available (Bundestag, 2014). Soon other TV channels, like the British BBC, the German DW or the Chinese CCTV followed. In recent years, especially Russian state founded news channels made their way into the German media landscape. The most known media channels are RT Deutschland, NewsFront Deutsch and since 2014 Sputnik Deutschland (Stelzenmüller, 2017). Sputnik Deutschland is one of the latest channels, with around 200.000 Facebook followers. They frequently publish on social media platforms and their article have a broad scope, from societal and lifestyle topics, up to economic and political topics. Sputnik Deutschland belongs to the international news agency Rossiya Segodnya, which is a state-owned media institution in Moscow (Sputnik Deutschland, 2018) (Snegovaya, 2015). As it is a relatively new media channel, almost exclusively available on social media platforms and financed and controlled by a foreign state, it is especially relevant for this research.

For this purpose, the research will focus on social media information, published by Sputnik Deutschland on Facebook. Pursuant to the dimensions of the research, not all Facebook post could be considered. Therefore, this paper will limit the post to a certain time-period. This period should be characterized by high political importance, for example during elections or governmental building processes. Especially the latter turned out to be a complex effort after the 2017 federal elections, the Bundestagswahlen, in Germany. The election results between the single parties only slightly differed and hence made it necessary to form coalitions (Bundeswahlleiter, 2017). To agree on common political orientations, involved parties had to agree on a common program. These conditions support distrust and doubts within the society

(Niedermayer & Westle, 2009). Thus, this time selection is interesting for the present research as the manipulative effects could be intensified and make the German society vulnerable. According to this, the research will only focus on the time from the beginning of the coalition negotiations on the first of February and the end of them on the third of March 2018.

This research will apply the discourse manipulation theory by Teun A. Van Dijk. The scholar based this theory on his research in Germany, where he analysed societal radicalization through medial discourse manipulation. As manipulation must be reflected within the aspect of historical and cultural aspects, this theory is particularly suitable for the research. Also, Van Dijk not only focuses on beliefs or ideas of manipulation, but clearly describes indicators for manipulative media tools (Van Dijk, 2006). They include for example, patterns of frequently highlighting certain viewpoints by completely fading out counterarguments. Also, the theory gives clear guidelines for extremely negatively or positively framings for political agendas or politicians. The data sampling for the research consists out of 240 Sputnik Deutschland Facebook posts, which are analysed by the indicators deducted by the above-named theory. To make the findings verifiable, the content analysis is implemented by using the coding tool Atlas.ti.

2   Theory and Conceptualization

2.1   Manipulation

The term manipulation derives etymology from the Latin words "manus" = hand and "plere" = to fill. It is used in the sense of "skilful handling of objects or persons" (Van Dijk, 2006). Scientifically, many disciplines, ranging from humanities, social psychology, philosophy, anthropology, communication and political science tried to determine and characterize the phenomenon of manipulation, but the topic is controversially discussed and lacking a common interpretation or definition of the term. Scholars from the different fields of science unequally emphasize cognitive, social or discursive aspects of manipulation and therefore differently approach it.

Maillat and Oswald (2009) for example argue, that manipulation is mainly analysed out of the perspective of the speaker or writer, in that case the manipulator. They advocate for a shift in perspective towards the recipient of the information. In their opinion, manipulation deals mainly with human errors to correctly interpret information and ways to exploit these human errors (Maillat & Oswald, 2009, S. 349). Rigotti argues in the same way, stating that "*the dynamics of manipulation are very close to the dynamics of human error*" (Rigotti, 2005, S. 69). Even if this approach is very interesting, it fades out several criteria and dimensions, which are frequently used in many definitions of manipulation, like the aspects of truth-conditionality of information, motivation of manipulation and the speaker´s interest and social constellations between interest groups, politicians and the public. Especially research in social media manipulation will inevitably arrive to the question of journalistic standards, correct media coverage and visualized interaction between senders and recipients. The current president of the United States for instance, Donald Trump, frequently accuses the media for manipulating the society by spreading fake news and misinforming people (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Fake news as a phenomenon, is commonly interpreted as "*made-up stuff, masterfully manipulated to look like credible journalistic reports that are easily spread online to large audiences willing to believe the fictions and spread the word*" (Holan, 2016).

In that context, Fitzpatrick describes the current discussions about fake news as the "evolution of "*post-truth politics*", whereby elites, organizations and politicians aim to influence public opinion by presenting ideas as facts and preventing people from other believes by framing them as lies (Fitzpatrick, 2018, S. 50). To include these important aspects of manipulation, a comprehensive approach towards manipulation is needed. Along this line Van Dijk observes,

that many dimensions, like social status, cognitive understanding and methods of discourse communication play an elementary role for manipulation and that an approach towards this phenomenon therefore must be triangulated (Van Dijk, 2006). He defines manipulation as:

> "a communicative and interactional practice, in which a manipulator exercises control over other people, usually against their will or against their best interests. In everyday usage, the concept of manipulation has negative associations – manipulation is bad – because such a practice violates social norms." (Van Dijk, 2006, S. 360)

Further, Van Dijk argues, that manipulation occurs, when an individual or a group abuses its power over another individual or group, for example, the media over the society or a politician over his/her voter/s, which he describes as domination. Out of that power position, the media for example could make others believe, that the interpretation of political issues by the media channel is in the best interest of the readers, but serves in first line the interest of the publisher (Van Dijk, 2006, S. 360). By informing and reporting about political issues, all media already exercise an influence towards the formation of an opinion of the recipients. In that sense, it could be stated that manipulation does not differ from legitimate persuasion. The differences are very vague and depend on the particular context, when and especially how political issues are addressed by the media. Van Dijk argues, that in the legitimate form of persuasion, the reader is

> "free to believe or act as they please, depending on whether or not they accept the arguments of the persuader whereas in manipulation recipients are typically assigned a more passive role: they are *victims* of manipulation. This negative consequence of manipulative discourse typically occurs when the recipients are unable to understand the real intentions or to see the full consequences of the beliefs or actions advocated by the manipulator" (Van Dijk, 2006, S. 361).

The borders between legitimate information and manipulation are contested in many aspects. In Germany, the media pledged themselves to obey a framework for journalistic standards, which is called "Pressekodex" (TDP, 2018). These guidelines contribute to ensure truthful, relevant, relatively complete and non-discriminatory information, which provide an overall perspective towards political issues, in order to qualify the reader to set his/her own opinion. Van Dijk portrays intentionally non-compliance to such guidelines as violation of social norms, which is a component of manipulation (Van Dijk, 2006, S. 363). Finally, the triangulated approach of Van Dijk allows to create a set of indicators, which are overall seen as manipulation, for

example, a permanent positive self-representation or a frequently negative presentation of other actions and opinions.

2.2 Public Opinion

This research aims to analyse the technics and efforts of social media channels to shape the public discourse of societies in manipulative means, in the example of a foreign state sponsored social media news channel "Sputnik Deutschland". The benefits for states in shaping the public opinion result in the opportunity, to have an influence in the outcome of other states political decisions, may it be in economic, military, cultural or political outcomes (Burstein & Freudenburg, 1978). In that context, states frequently supported or denounced political agendas of politicians and candidates, which assume to correspond or oppose to the own political agenda (Burstein & Freudenburg, 1978). Amongst others, Dov Levin points out several attempts of foreign states interference in the public opinion to support or oppose political agendas of other states. He states, that there are more than 100 examples of public opinion interference just between the USA and Russia between the years 1946 and 2000 (Levin, 2017). In 1996 he mentions, that the USA officially supported Boris Jelzin as the Russian President, instead of Gennadi Sjuganov, the leader of the communist party. They supported Jelzin with political campaign consultants and in financial terms (Levin, 2017). However, influence of the public opinion towards decision making processes of states is contested and therefore first has to be discussed in the perspective of the further thesis.

> "Narrowly defined, public opinion represents the thought of any given group of society at any given time toward a given object. Looked at from the broadest standpoint, it is the power of the group to sway the larger public in its attitude toward ideas" (Bernays, 1928, S. 959)

The extent to which public opinion influences national and public policies is strongly contested by social and media scientist (Burstein, The Impact of Public Opinion on Public Policy: A Review and an Agenda, 2003). But many scholars agree on the proposition, that a strong salient issue to the public has also a strong impact on policy makers (Aldrich, 1995) (Dahl, 1989) (Mueller, 2001). The Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011 for example, caused a complete change of public opinion towards the use of nuclear power plants in Germany. Before the disaster, political debates to promote sustainable energy supply forms have been rare. With the changed opinion towards the safety of nuclear power plants, the public opinion forced policy makers to refrain from nuclear power (Wolling & Arlt, 2014). The more salient an issue is to the public, the more influential it becomes for policy makers (Stimson,

MacKuen, & Erikson, 1995). Also, Page and Shapiro (1983, S. 189) note, that "opinion changes are important causes of policy change".

Most theories about the influence of public opinion towards public policies depend on the degree of how much power is attributed to the public, for example in forms of referendums and elections. If political systems attribute low power to the public, the incentives for policy makers to follow the public opinion are also low (Block, 2010) (Domhoff, 1998) (Korpi, 1989) (Page & Shapiro, 1983). In general, the influence of the public opinion is strongest on issues that are highly important for the public and relatively simple to understand, even if such issues are seldom (Burstein, The Impact of Public Opinion on Public Policy: A Review and an Agenda, 2003). Also, Jones (1994, S. 53) argues, that constituents indeed intend to influence political decisions in their interest, but complex problems postulate high research efforts and strong cognitive processing. As the cognitive processing of humans is limited, people have to make compromises on the importance of political problems. Therefore, simple issues become more salient than others and attain more attention by decision makers (Jones, 1994) (Arnold, 1990).

Besides divergent views of scholars, which issues attain more attention than others, there is an overall agreement on the substantial relationship between public opinion and public policies and that state regulation is traceable incorporating public opinion (Hays, Esler, & Hays, 1996) (Erikson, Wright, & McIver, 1993).

Public opinion becomes even more important during elections and coalition building processes. Running officials who focus their political agenda on the assumptions, based on public opinions, are especially considered by constituents on election day (Arnold, 1990) (Jones, 1994) (Lindaman & Haider-Markel, 2002) (Kitschelt, 1994) (Blais, Blake, & Dion, 1993). This leads to a stronger political responsiveness of political candidates towards highly salient issues. For example, the dominating topic in the German federal elections in 2016 has been the refugee crisis. Besides all other topics, mainly all parties and candidates held strong positions or presented approaches to solve the crisis (Decker, 2017). Jones (1994, S. 10) states in that aspect:

> "If only a few issues at a time can be salient to the public and the legislature, and if responsiveness is high primarily when salience is high, then responsiveness will be high on only those few issues. (Burstein, The Impact of Public Opinion on Public Policy: A Review and an Agenda, 2003, S. 30)"

Exemplary therefore is the political manifesto of the German Party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AFD; eng. = Alternative for Germany), which is a conservative party, frequently associated to far-right populism (Arzheimer, 2015) (Lehmann & Matthieß, 2017). The dominating topics in the run-up of the 2017 elections, mainly originating from socio-political issues made 60% of the political agenda of the AFD. Namely political concepts against a stronger Europeanization, against a NATO commitment and against current migration policies. On the other hand, they promoted the strengthening of traditional and national values and identities (Lehmann & Matthieß, 2017, S. 21).

The complex interplay between public policy and public opinion is also determined by interest organizations (Hansen, 1991). Interest groups and organizations are composed out of different political parties, elites, particular business and industry elites, citizens' initiative associations, churches, media outlets, labour unions, political, social and economic foundations and think tanks (Domhoff, 1998).The influence of a particular group or actor towards public policy heavily depends on the degree of management and the disposal of material and financial resources, or the number of members as well as the societal influence (Wright, 1996). Extreme well-financed groups, like the automotive industry in Germany, regularly find their way into political decision-making processes, even if the targeted political outcome seems to be in contrast with the public opinion (Wright, 1996) (Domhoff, 1998). While Domhoff and Wright describe the influence of interest groups as higher influential on public policy than public opinion, Lohmann (1993), Denzau and Munger (1986) and Kollmann (1998) argue, that their interest cannot prevail over the public opinion. It is generally agreed, that political activities by interest groups are at its most effective, if they are consistent with the public opinion, which underlines the strong importance of the public opinion (Hansen, 1991) (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998). This reciprocal relationship fosters another dimension, namely the exertion of influence by interest groups and organizations towards the public (Hansen, 1991). In that context, many organizations provide information or publish results of studies in public and address them also especially to politicians in charge (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998).

Especially constituents that are uninformed, divided or ignorant to certain political issues represent a valuable target for interest groups, as the costs to influence them, in comparison to well-informed constituents, that already have a strong opinion to certain political issues, are very low and the expected outcome is high (Denzau & Munger, 1986).

> "Legislators whose geographic constituency has strong, informed preferences about some policy will receive resource contributions from an interest group only if voters and the interest group want the same thing; otherwise, the interest group will search out some other legislator whose geographic constituency is either ignorant or indifferent…The less hostile that voters are to a given policy, the lower the minimum price an interest group must pay in exchange."
> (Denzau & Munger, 1986, S. 101-103)

As Legislators, policy makers, interest groups and finally to a huge extent the public as an actor have stringent and significant interests, shaped by many political ideologies and different motivations, the interplay between all actors in respect to public policy decision making processes is very complex and heavily depends on particular characteristics of the individual actor and the time period, for example during elections or referendums (Baumgartner & Jones, 2005).

2.3   The Role of the internet

The internet is an essential component of the current media environment as more and more people consume information online. Therefore, it is an elementary important media for the formation of public opinion. Since 1996, the World Wide Web evolved as a major medium for information purpose, which importance is challenging traditional media like television, newspapers and radio stations (Johnson, Braima, & Sothirajah, 1999).

In addition, scholars like Rheingold (1993) and Mann (1995) early recognized the potential of the internet for political use. In their view, the internet was probably an improvement for more transparency in political processes, the empowerment of citizens and would increase public participation towards politics (Mann & Doell, 1995) (Rheingold, 1993). The internet enhanced new technologies in the information and communication sector, like emails and messenger, accompanied by electric devices like tablets, smartphones and notebooks. Thus, it also notably changed the way of political information and communication (Garrett, 2006). Many scholars refer to the importance of campaigning websites of political candidates, but also interest groups and organizations use the internet to inform about particular political issues (Kenski & Stroud, 2006). Concomitant to the rising number of political websites and online presence of politicians, political parties and interest groups, the number of people, using mainly the internet to access political information, increased (Rainie, Cornfield, & Horrigan, 2004). While in the year 2000 only 18% of the US citizens pointed out, that they mainly use the internet for accessing political information (Kohut, 2000), in 2004 already 29% declared to get their information from the web (Rainie, Cornfield, & Horrigan, 2004). In

Germany, the number of people, using the internet to access political information amounted for 55% in 2015, with a growing tendency (Stark & Bergerhoff, , 2017).The effect on political participatory and the impact on public opinion is controversial. Academic literature mainly focuses on two dimensions linking political participation, formation of public opinion and the internet, namely: (1) the decline in participation costs and (2) the promotion of identity and community (Garrett, 2006, S. 204).

2.3.1 Political Participation online

The free and open design of the internet allows the interaction between individuals without regard for geographic location and distance (Pastor-Satorras & Vespignani, S. 3). Hence, not only obstacles in accessing information and content have been reduced, but also the possibilities to publish information and content significantly increased (Leizerov, 2000). Bonchek states:

> Through electronic mail, newsgroups, bulletin boards, and online publications, citizens and organizations are using computer networks to debate political issues, obtain political information, and organize political activity (Bonchek, 1995, S. 1)

In this research, the following definition of political participation is used: 'action by ordinary citizens directed toward influencing some political outcomes' (Verba, Schlozman, Lehman , & Nie, 1993, S. 304). The prevailing academic view states, that by diminishing costs, resulting from accessing and especially from publishing political information, the internet directly contributes to a higher and more frequent share and exchange of information online and therefore contributes to an increase in political participation (Bonchek, 1995) (Garrett, 2006) (Leizerov, 2000) (Selnow, 1998).Critical scholars query the causal relationship between the internet and increasing political participation. Bruce Bimber for example mentions, that there was indeed a significant increase of political participation since the 1950s in the US, but the reasons therefore are rather an increase in the formal and political education level and a general expansion on media infrastructure than the rise of the internet (Bimber, 1998). More political participation and direct access to political information enables constituents to better assess and scrutinize decisions and therefore attributes more accountability towards policies, taken by politicians.

> "The ability to disseminate information rapidly could ultimately increase political accountability. Elites are more likely to behave in a manner consistent with citizen concerns if they work in an environment where they must assume their actions are being observed and that news of any inappropriate actions – even those traditionally outside the media spotlight –

> will quickly reach the public. This can be seen as a reversal of the Foucauldian panopticon."
> (Garrett, 2006, S. 209)

On the other hand, the internet gives also politicians in charge the possibility to interact directly with their potential voters, bypassing traditional frames of journalism, associated with newspapers and interviews. The two ways of political participation and responsiveness foster transparency and thus increase confidence in political processes (Nye, Zelikow , & King, 1997). In terms of political participation, the internet exceeds traditional media´s possibilities, which makes it especially valuable.

2.3.2   Collective Identity and Community

Another virtue of the world wide web is the ability to connect dispersed individuals, who care about same political issues, and thus create a space for a larger community. Unlike structured interest organizations, public opinion is often vague and fragmented, which makes it non-binding to political decision making processes (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001). A collective identity, fostered by internet communication and organization may mobilize collective action and support public opinion and movements, like it happened in Germany in 2014 (Brainard & Siplon, 2000) (Myers D. J., 2000). The "Green Movement" is regarded as one of the most powerful expression of public opinion in opposition to governmental activities, which was mainly organized through announcements, revelations and open petitions in the internet (Papadakis, 2014). Several authors, like Brainard, Siplon and Elin advocate new possibilities of the internet, which allow face-to-face networks (Brainard & Siplon, 2000) (Elin, 2013). Kohut (2004) points out another dimension of online identity and community building possibilities. He claims, that already highly debated and salient political issues, get even more polarized in the internet, as information exposure takes place on concentrated websites. Information consumers tend to create a homogenous information environment, reproducing existing knowledge and ideologies, by neglecting information outside this online environment. In that context, he highlights for example, email news stories and news blogs (Kohut, 2004). Furthermore, it is criticised, that internet facilitates selective and customized news consumption. Thereby, political issues pop up more crucial and political responses are interpreted sharper, than they would be interpreted under consideration of different media types (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015) (Sunstein, 2001). Flaxman, Goel and Rao state in their article "Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers and Online News Consumption", that:

> We have thus far examined segregation in terms of the distance between individuals' mean
> ideological positions. It could be the case, for example, that individuals typically consume

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content from a variety of ideological viewpoints, though ultimately skewing toward the left or right, leading to moderate overall segregation. Alternatively, individuals might be tightly concentrated around their ideological centers, only rarely reading content from across the political spectrum. These two potential patterns have markedly different implications for the broader issues of political discussion and consensus formation (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao , 2016, S. 313)

2.4   The Role of Social Media:

Social media is defined as: *"forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos)"* (Merriam Webster , 2018). In this research, the term social media includes various popular platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, if not specifically mentioned otherwise. Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook have been subject to numerous researches in the fields of sociology, communication, marketing and political science in the last decades (Fitzpatrick, 2018). Especially for political science it became a sensitive topic, due to the promising effects of social media campaigning. The importance of social media has been discussed for example in combination with the "2009 Twitter Revolution" in Iran, whereby many scholars argued, that the mass protests took place because of the mobilization effects of social media platforms (Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheafer, 2013). Academic viewpoints towards social media are divided in two camps, the "cyber-enthusiasts" and the "cyber-skeptics" (Gladwell & Shirky, 2011). While the enthusiasts emphasize on the strong political influence of social media platforms, the sceptics downplay the interference of social media, stating that they do not enhance political participation (Gladwell & Shirky, 2011) (Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheafer, 2013). But even sceptics agree, that social media shows a mass accessibility and that also small effects can have drastic consequences.

> However, the ability to reach large populations online means that even small effects could yield behaviour changes for millions of people. Furthermore, as many elections are competitive, these changes could affect electoral outcomes. For example, in the 2000 US presidential election, George Bush beat Al Gore in Florida by 537 votes (less than 0.01% of votes cast in Florida). Had Gore won Florida, he would have won the election. (Bond, Fariss , Jones, Kramer, & Marlow, 2012, S. 295)

In the following section, the main arguments for the importance of social media platforms for contemporary politics, namely (1) network clusters, (2) filter bubbles, (3) cross media importance and (4) speed of information will be pointed out.

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2.4.1 Network Clusters

Many authors highlight the value of highly connected individuals as key elements in the propagation of information through social media networks (Daniel M. Romero, 2010) (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014). Network clusters describe online ties between individual users of a particular social media platform. If one user, for example posts an article in his/her social media feed, the same article appears also in the timeline of linked users, labelled "followers" or "friends". The higher linked one user is, the likeliness of the appearance of the same article for example is equally higher. This means, that certain political issues will be addressed towards an individual user from several directions, creating the impression, that a particular political issue must be especially important, as everybody is "talking" about it or has a similar opinion about it (Sunstein, 2001). Several authors like Pfeffer, Zorbach and Carley (2014) express, that it is empirically proven, that locally connected social media clusters are elementary important for the epidemic spread of information. These amplifying effects of information spreading in social media platforms is also conceptualized under the term echo chambers (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014).

2.4.2 Filter Bubbles

Social media algorithms work in a way, that all kind of information and content is increasingly personalized for the users of social media platforms, to make the particular user´s social media experience more satisfactory (Pariser, 2011) (Agichtein, Brill, & Dumais, 2006) (Das, 2007). Already in 1972 Simon states, that people tend to create ties with people from the same or similar socio-economic status, class, common interests and ideological and political viewpoints (Simon, 1972). This concept continues also on the social media environment (Pariser, 2011). As a result of that, social media users find themselves in a concentrated "bubble" of matching opinions and recommended information, which especially gains momentum in combination with above-mentioned network clusters.

"*Moreover, individuals are more likely to share information that conforms to opinions in their local social neighborhoods*" (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao , 2016, S. 299). The Lack of diversity within filter bubbles contributes, similar as the network clusters, to a massive overestimation of single opinions, ideas and political issues, as other opinions, which could be contrary to the user´s opinion, are wiped out by machine learning algorithms and do not pass the borders of the "filter bubble" (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001) (Pariser, 2011).

2.4.3   Cross Media Importance

After interviewing several journalists, the researchers Diakopoulus, De Choudhury and Naaman concluded, that social media is becoming more and more an important source of information for traditional media, bypassing long established journalistic rules. They noted:

> "Overwhelmingly, the journalists were concerned with the issue of verification, either of content or of sources. Several participants mentioned that their role included debunking or confirming social media rumors (content verification), as well as assessing the credibility of sources (source verification). One participant articulated the workflow challenge around a specific reporting incident: "We were tempted to say 'there's a gunman in the Flatiron building' and 60 people are saying that it's so on Twitter … learning how to apply all of the traditional skills of journalism, verifying, checking information and what it means… doing that quickly and accurately and with a team of people not always in the same place, that workflow has been a challenge" (Diakopoulos, De Choudhury, & Naaman, 2012, S. 7).

Broad research towards this phenomenon revealed, that traditional media pick up trending Facebook and Twitter stories, especially real time pictures from eyewitnesses, in the early stage of a story (Myers, Chenguang, , & Leskovec, 2012) (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014). The effects of reciprocal cross media coverage lead, similar like the effects of filter bubbles, to an immense boost of single stories and political issues. Myers, Chenguan and Leskovec (2012, S. 33) analysed these effects and concluded, that "about one-third of the information volume on social media is triggered by external events and factors outside the network". Some social media platforms, like Twitter e.g., even display the currently top trending stories, which become apparent through many likes, shares and retweets and by that once again boost the diffusion of stories, news, and information (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014) (Meraz, 2009).

2.4.4   Diffusion Speed

Another important characteristic of social media is the fact, that information and messages are accessible and available in real-time and 24/7 without constraints. On the other hand, newspapers, magazines and other conventional media have firm circles of publishing their information, once in a week or daily. This entails, that traditional media is significantly slower in reporting, commenting or confirming stories or events. However, if rumours or false information about certain political debates or institutions spread in the society through the use of social media platforms, the image loss for the affected person or institution is extremely high and a reaction has to take place within hours or preferably within minutes (Wu & Huberman, 2007) (Zhang, Johnson , Seltzer , & Bichard, 2010). Especially remarkably in the

aspect of speed and the fast acceleration of information in social media platforms are again Facebook and the microblogging platform Twitter (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014). Consequently, they play an enormous role in the propagation of information online and its influence on public opinion should therefore be highly considered.

In addition, recent research highlights that content, which triggers emotions and sentiment and uses visualized forms of presentation like pictures, animated graphics and videos, has even a significant higher speed of diffusion (Fitzpatrick, 2018) (Chang, 2006) (Knobloch-Westerwick, Appiah, & Alter, 2008) (Arapakis, Lalmas , Cambazoglu , Marcos , & Jose, 2014) (Keib, et al., 2018) (Kwon, Cha, & Jung, 2017) (Hao, An , Zhang , Li, & We, 2015). In many cases, emotional pictures for example are the crucial factor, why individuals are interested in social media articles at all (Sargent, 2007). The visualized framing of news stories must be interpreted in terms of selective exposure, which contributes also to the phenomenon of filter bubbles. Overall, images are chosen to trigger situational feelings, emotions or address personal settings and symbols of identity (Chang, 2006) (Bucher & Schumacher, 2006). The integration of images and videos is demonstrably a basic part of social media posts. An exemplary category for the fast diffusion of visualized content could be seen in *memes*, which are pictures of mostly persons in an expressive pose, equipped with a catchy text or slogan. Memes help the reader to quickly access and understand the main information or argument of a post, which make them a powerful tool for the influencing of public opinion (Lester, 2013).

3   Methodology

3.1   Data Collection

To collect the cross-sectional data sampling the software tool Sociograph.io has been used. This program enables to filter posts regarding an account or publisher, a certain time frame or keywords. For this research, all posts of the Sputnik Deutschland account have been filtered in the time frame between the first of February and the third of March. The first filtering process resulted in 708 Facebook post of Sputnik. These posts included all kind of videos, photos and articles. Due to the limitations of this research, not all Facebook posts could have been analysed and therefore a second process of filtering had to be applied. In this second step, videos and images had been excluded and the reduction thus lead to 315 Sputnik articles. In a last step, these remaining sampling has been pre-analysed to select only articles, which primarily concern about political issues. Articles reporting about sport events, lifestyle issues or technical reviews have been rejected, as this research will focus on manipulation of public opinion towards political issues, in the view of the coalition building process in Germany. Finally, the sampling for this research is made from 240 Sputnik articles, addressing primarily political topics. A list of the complete data sampling could be found in the Annex. Thus, the unit of observation for this research is the Facebook news channel Sputnik Deutschland and the unit of analysis is the above-mentioned post sampling.

3.2   Assesment method

The assessment method of the sampling will be a transparent and replicable qualitative content analysis. The following indicators have been deducted from Van Dijk´s discourse manipulation theory. These indicators include (1) the layout of the article. Herby the analysis investigates especially catchy headlines, a flashy presentation or significant pictures, which for example includes ideological symbols, transports emotions or political beliefs. Pictures of persons will be analysed regarding the individual pose and facial expression. The indicator is described more precise in the coding scheme in the annex. Secondly (2), the coding analyses semantic features, like the particular positive and negative representation of actors and actions, conducted by the actors. As Sputnik Deutschland is a Russian state financed media outlet, representations of Russia will be interpreted as self-representation. Representation of other actors, consequently as other-representation. The same counts for the positive or negative representation of actions, conducted by the actors. For example, highlighting diplomatic and peaceful political approaches instead of convicting an actor of violating laws.

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Also, the topic selection will be analysed within the semantic indicators. By choosing any topic, the author of an article already reflects certain issues. If certain topics are frequently chosen, the reader could get the impression, that this topic is more relevant than the other. Hereby, several topics are negatively connoted, like conflicts, unemployment, immigration, political problems or crime related topics. Whereas other topics, like economic growth, peaceful relations and developments evoke positive assumptions towards the particular political issue. The last group of indicators (3), investigates rhetorical strategies. Rhetorical stylistics, like metaphors or hyperboles compare the original political issue with understandable other constructs, and let political issues appear simply understandable. Moreover, they could reinforce an argument and picture political issues more drastic, than they are. For example, by describing refugee movements as a "wave of refugees", the recipient already gets a stronger impression about the topic. This part will also analyse assumptions and rumours, which could be detected regarding the quality of sources and if assumptions or guesses for example are labelled like this or presented as facts. The coding process was conducted by using the coding software atlas.ti. This software allows to code the corresponding text passages and traceably present the results. The list of all applied codes throughout the research is demonstrated in the annex.

4 Assessment

4.1 Topic Selection

The first step by analysing and evaluating each of the 240 Sputnik articles was to classify and summarize all articles in categories, depending on the content and the chosen topic. Regarding the theoretical framework for this research, a political issue could be perceived more important than another if a speaker, in that research Sputnik Deutschland, frequently addresses certain political issues over others. The results of the research showed, that around one third of all articles are related to the ongoing conflict in Syria (28%). Herby, most of the articles addressed the UN Resolution 2401 and informed about the ceasefire conditions for all Syrian conflict actors, including Russia, the US, Europe, Turkey and actors from the middle east, like Israel and Iran. Also, breaking news about events, like terror attacks or the latest conflict development have been reported in these articles. Some fewer articles pointed out the poor living conditions in Syria and that many people try to escape from the conflict zones to safe places inside Syria or outside the country.

Frequency of Topics

- Russia as a possible Manipulator of US Elections 2%
- Supporting Austria 2%
- Critic of AFD 1%
- Supporting Die Linke 1%
- Supporting CDU 2%
- Migration 4%
- Terrorism 5%
- NATO and US Aggressions 5%
- Critics of CDU, SPD 7%
- Highlighting Russias Military Power 8%
- Russia as a Victim 8%
- Ukrain 13%
- Syria 28%
- EU and USA Critics 14%
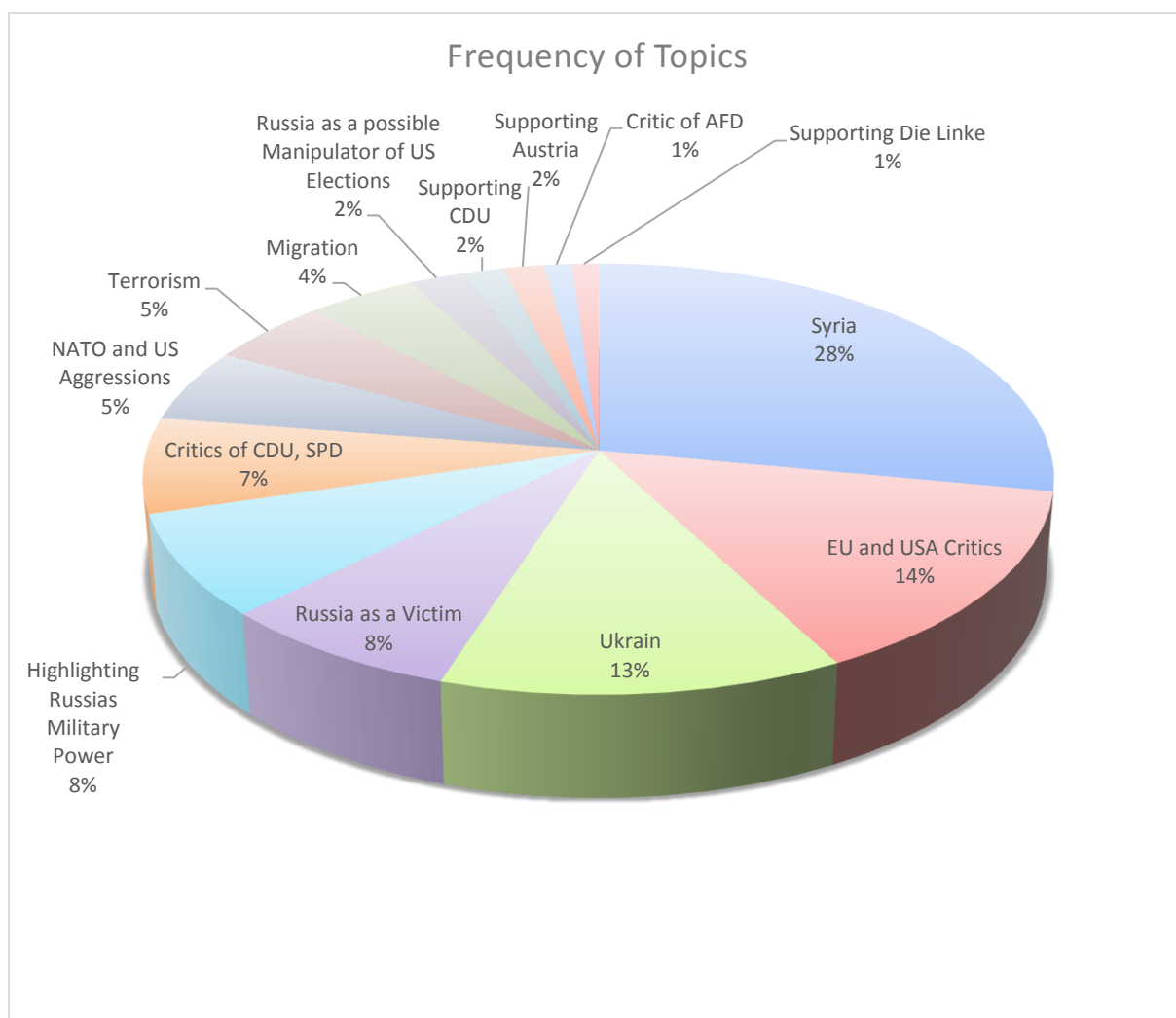
The second big cluster is made from a variety of articles, criticising the European Union as a political system and the politics of the United States of America. In both cases, especially foreign policy issues and military and security policies have been in the focus of the articles. Besides that, issues of sovereignty of the European member states have been thematised.

Also, the situation and the conflict in Ukraine has regularly been the topic of the articles. Sputnik hereby discussed the Minsk agreements and the various positions of the European Union, the Russian Federation, the government of Ukraine, the USA, but also the role of the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe), the Donetsk People´s Republic and the Luhansk People´s Republic. Furthermore, the referendum and the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula has been reviewed in many articles.

The subsequent articles are more fragmented in the aspect of their content and thus, the topic groups are far smaller than the above-mentioned topic clusters. Like the diagram (Figure 1) shows, around 11% of the remaining articles directly covered inner political issues in relation

to the main German political parties, like the SPD, CDU, Bündnis 90 Die Grünen, Die Linke, FDP and the AFD. These articles informed about party congresses, candidatures or general political viewpoints. In similar frequency, in each case around 8% of all the articles, Sputnik highlighted the military power of Russia and simultaneously portrayed Russia as a victim, for example of (unrightfully) sanctions. Many of these articles included reports about technical renewals for military equipment but also the high readiness and high standards of the Russian army. Finally, the topics of *Terrorism* (5%) and *Migration in Germany* (4%) appeared comparatively rather rare.

In several cases, the determination of the topics emerged as a complex and difficult task, as certain articles blurred the lines between the original topic of one article with other, related issues to that topic. For example, the initial makeup, the headline and the first two paragraphs of article 273 suggested to inform about the relations between Russia and the *West*. The headline stated: "Russia and the West - The multipolar world does not need a teacher-student relationship" and the article seems to illustrate complicated interplay between democratic and authoritarian systems, pleading for a strengthening of international organisations. Though, in the third paragraph the topic shifts away from international organisations and takes up another critical topic, related to the sovereignty of Germany after the second World War. Especially in the German context, the topic of sovereignty is a very sensitive issue, as large parts of the German people still belief, that Germany has not recovered full sovereignty after the World War and is in the legal sense still occupied by the US and the victorious powers. Thus, large conspiracy groups like the "Reichsbürger" emerged, neglecting the German legal system and spreading the rumour, that Germany is in fact ruled by the US. As this conspiracy theory is widespread in Germany, the content of the following text passage could be classified in an individual topic category.

> "… the problem is the current construction and constitution of the European Union. Even if Germany had the fortune to get new visionaries of the caliber Willy Brandt and especially Egon Bahr, Berlin could currently do nothing with this stroke of luck: "Germany has less sovereignty in foreign policy than at that time as an occupied country. That's because we gave everything to Brussels, and we think that's great too." Article 273

Several other articles subliminally transported similar sensitive and highly polarized topics, like the social disparity between the east and the west or questioned the necessity and legitimacy of a German Army, which is, since the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany, a controversially discussed political issue. Also, well-known rumours and

conspiracy theories are regularly triggered and chosen as a topic. As a further example, Article 74 questions, if there is a causality between the high number of cancer diseases concerning the people of the Portuguese Island of Terceira and the US military airbase.

""Hell Repeating": Does US Air Force Base in Portugal Spread Cancer?" Article 74. It is assumed that emitting jet fuel on the Airforce base leads to a contamination of the groundwater and hence fosters a higher probability of the disease. Although the term "Chemtrail" is not explicit used, the story behind is very close interwoven to the existing conspiracy theory of chemtrails, which is a so-called instrument of elites to reduce human population.

Even if the individual topic selections did not show definite indications for manipulation, it could be stated, that the overall picture out of all 240 Sputnik articles shows clear topic preferences, namely the Syrian conflict, the Ukrainian conflict and a collection of various critics, towards the EU, the USA and Organisations like the NATO. In addition, several subtopics occasionally trigger so-called societal "breaking points", which are made from highly disputed political issues and persistent conspiracy theories.

4.2   Picture Selection

A picture is worth a thousand words – is a well-known and therefore nearly integral part of all kind of journalism. Photos and Pictures are also a basic component of every Sputnik Deutschland article. Pictures contribute to the overall layout of articles and can not only produce certain feelings and views towards certain political topics, they can also evoke a reader´s interest to read the article at all (Van Dijk, 2006). Particularly significant pictures can even become a symbolic representation for certain topics. Famous examples for this phenomenon could be children in war zones, which illustrate the consequences of conflicts. As they trigger the reader´s sentiments and make complex situation easily intelligibly, they can quickly spread, especially in social media networks.

Therefore, it was important to put attention towards the used pictures in Sputnik articles during this research. The findings of the picture analysis herby showed, that even different articles within one of the previously outlined topics, implement comparable pictures with similar features and characteristics. Altogether, these characteristics shape certain patterns of how a situation, an actor or particular political issues are visualized and presented. In accordance to the topics, discussed in the first step, the findings will be portrayed in detail.

4.2.1 Characteristics for pictures used in the context of the Syrian conflict

The majority of all pictures, used for articles about the Syrian conflict, generally represent weapons, which are used in the conflict, destroyed houses and places, wounded people or

soldiers from different nations, sides and groups. However, the detailed analysis of each picture showed, that soldiers from different conflicting parties are represented in different ways. Pro –government forces and militias, as well as the Syrian Armed Forces (SAD), for example are frequently represented in a defensive and reserved way. Pictures about pro-governmental forces barely show hand weapons like automatic rifles or pistols. Depicted soldiers show smiling or thoughtful faces, which creates a positive impression about the situation. A special finding, which is also mentioned in the theoretical framework, is, that several soldiers show gestures and symbols, which are trans-regional well-known. Picture 129 and 60 for example, show SAD soldiers, displaying the "Victory" or "Peace"-

Figure 2: Friendly Forces, Article 60   Figure 1: Russian Soldiers, Article 65

Symbol, which could categorically rather be classified in a peaceful and friendly sense, than in an aggressive or threatening meaning. Russian troops are pictured in a similar way. Russian soldiers appear calm and de-escalating, for example, by carrying their weapons on the back. In additions, Russian soldiers are almost exclusively portrayed in a humanitarian purpose, dis

Figure 3: Friendly Forces, Article 129

Another recurring pattern could be found in the martial and hostile picture selection for the ongoing conflict development in the Syrian area of East-Ghuta. This area has been heavily embattled between pro-governmental forces and Russia on the one hand and Islamic rebels on the other. While the Russian actions have been broadly criticized by the US and Europe, Sputnik uses extraordinary brutal pictures which point out, regarding to Sputnik, the necessity of a Russian humanitarian intervention. Pictures mainly show destroyed houses, heavily armed terrorist and rebels as well as severely injured people.

Figure 5: Airstrike Syria, Article 120   Houses Syria, Article 158

Figure 7: Destroyed Streets Syria, Article 146

Figure 6: Destroyed Streets Syria, Article 164

Figure 8: Civilian Casualties, Article 124

Figure 9: Civilian Casualties, Article 126

Figure 10: Civilian Casualties, Article 198

4.2.2 Characteristics for Pictures used in the Context of the Ukrainian Conflict

Just as in the case of the Syrian conflict, the evaluation and the analysis of pictures in relation with the Ukrainian conflict equally showed differences in the picture selection, corresponding to different conflict parties. The armed forces of Ukraine (ZSU), for example, are predominantly portrayed in conflict or combat scenes, which happen right in that moment when the picture was taken. Consequently, recipients of those pictures could get the impression, that all use of violence is originating by the Ukrainian governmental forces. This thought implements that the Ukrainian forces, as well as the Ukrainian Government, which in fact controls the army, are portrayed in a rather negative light, as they are given the role of an

aggressor of the conflict. Other pro-governmental forces, militias and paramilitary groups are also represented on pictures in several Sputnik articles. Hereby it was noticeable, that most of the pictures came along with Ukrainian symbols, banners and flags in the background of the picture. Furthermore, pro-governmental persons in the picture show nationalistic and military gestures, as they for example, clinched their right hand to a fist and put it on their breast. In some pictures the pro-governmental fighters are additionally portrayed with masks and armbands, which aim to disguise their personal identity but simultaneously demonstrate a membership or belonging towards a movement or a group. Especially the covered identity of the persons creates the perception, that these persons deny controllability and thus create a form of risk and threat.

Figure 12: Ukrainian Nationalist Militants, Article 94 Ukrainian Soldiers, Article 93

Figure 13: Ukrainian Soldiers, Article 192

Figure 14: Ukrainian Police Forces, Article 8

Figure 15: Ukrainian Military Vehicle, Article 55

In the context about the Crimean Peninsula on the contrary, the Sputnik articles reveal a different pattern in the use of the pictures. Many articles about the Crimea are associated with static aerial photographs, that show different cities on the Crimean Peninsula during the evenings in a festive and peaceful atmosphere with many lights in the streets and buildings. A few pictures show foreign politicians, in that case from the German AFD, visiting the peninsula together with smiling children. These pictures rather emphasise calm and peaceful situations than threatening aspects of the Ukrainian conflict.

Figure 17: Ukrainian People, Article 137 ... of Friendship between Russia ... n Kerch, Article 116

Figure 19: Crimean City, Article 48 ... Crimean Port, 102

Figure 21: AFD Politician visiting the Crimean Peninsula, Article 48

Figure 20: Crimean City, Article 34

4.2.3   Characteristics for Pictures used in the Context of Military Topics

A broad range of Sputnik articles concerns about military topics, especially about US and NATO aggressions and about Russia, as a military power. The pictures, which have been utilized for the articles are similar in many ways. In total, many pictures show airplanes and fighting jets, but also tanks and soldiers in the field. Also, by portraying military equipment, planes and vehicles, the analysis showed some differences in the presentation between different actors, mainly the US and Russia. The first finding in that sense was, that pictures, in the context of US aggressions nearly almost portray weapons or soldiers in action. This means, that tanks for example, are photographed right in the moment, when they fire a grenade. This also counts for ship cannons and medium-range-missiles. One article about the US nuclear plans portrays a nuke in that moment when it explodes and demonstrably shows the nuclear mushroom cloud. Only a few single articles about the US military power or aggressions are depicted with static pictures, e.g. showing battleships on the sea or planes in the sky, without obviously combatting a third party.

Figure 23: US Army, Ar   Figure 22: US Navi, Article 142

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Figure 24: Nuclear Mushroom, Article 174

Figure 25: US Soldiers, Article 50

On the contrary, articles about Russia´s military strength almost solely focus on the airforce. Hereby it was noticeable, that even if there have been many pictures of the Russian forces, no picture included weapons or ammunition linked to Russian forces. All pictures represented the Russian ships, submarines or jets in a peaceful and defensive way. An indicator for the peaceful and idealizing way of representation could be found in figure 29, that shows Russian warships with a festively decoration.

Figure 26: Russian Jet, Article 195

Figure 27: Russian Jet, Article 37

Figure 29: Russian Warships, Article 85

Figure 28: Russian Submarine, Article 32

Regarding to the theoretical framework, pictures have the potential to emphasise certain aspects over others and therefore can have a high influence on the perception of a political issue. The analysis of the pictures, concerning military topics, clearly shows, that the aspect of an offensive US military is highly emphasised by using dynamic photos and snapshots of firefights. On the other side, the picture selection highlights a nearly harmonic and defensive character of the Russian Forces.

4.2.4 Characteristics for Pictures used in the Context of Politicians

One of the most important aspects of successful politicians is a proper management of public relations and public self-representation. Consequently, if politicians have a positive and top-performing image, also the chance to get re-elected is higher. The image of politicians is not only measured by their performance or political output. Not seldom, the image of politicians is characterized by a trustful and credible appearance, which is an individual perception. As an example, a former member of Barrack Obama´s election campaign team, Julius van der Laar stated, that the public perception of Obama has been too elitist for a long time. To improve his public perception and set him more people-oriented, they advised Obama to dress more casual during TV interviews, for example, by rolling up the sleeves of the shirt and skip tie and jacket. Regarding van der Laar, the strategy showed effects in the public perception (Laar, 2017).

By portraying politicians in a confident or in a confused pose, for example, the media influences the public image of a politician to large extents. Also a few of the Sputnik articles show pictures of politicians, primarily of the German chancellor Angela Merkel, the Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz, the French president Emmanuel Macron and the Russian president Wladimir Putin. The analysis of pictures from politicians similarly shows various characteristics, that could be attributed towards individual politicians. First, the politicians that are mostly shown are Angela Merkel and Wladimir Putin. In the first step, the analysis put attention on the facial expression of portrayed persons. In that case, it could be recorded, that Angela Merkel is repeatedly portrayed in a very doubtful and ruminative pose. The eyes are lowered and almost convey a depressed impression.

Figure 31: German Chancellor Merkel, Article 121   Figure 30: Macron, Merkel and Trump, Article 238

With regards to Wladimir Putin and Sebastian Kurz, the results are rather contrary. Many examples show Putin in a very self-confident and serious pose. Additionally, he is predominantly portrayed with a friendly and likeable smile. The same counts for Sebastian Kurz, the Austrian chancellor. He is portrayed in similar ways, smiling and confident. In several pictures Putin and Kurz are even represented together in a friendly and cooperative way, as both shake hands.
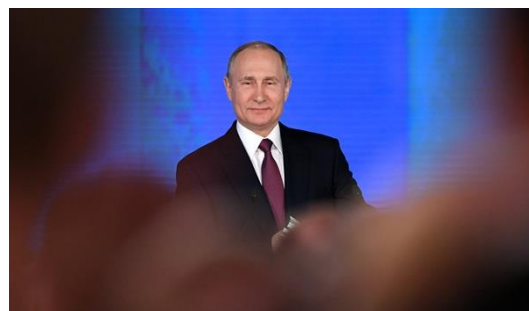
Figure 33: Kurz and Putin, Articles 10, 181   n President Putin, Article: 9

Figure 35 Austrian Chancellor Kurz, Article 154   and Putin, Article 186

Moreover, in a second step, the analysis focuses on the context of the portrayed pictures. In that aspect, several differences could be detected. According to that, Merkel is occasionally presented in the context of weapons and immigrants (stated by the content of the article). It must be noted, that especially political issues concerning immigration policies are highly controversial debated political issues in Germany. The so-called migration crisis is broadly

interpreted as a political failure of the government by the German society. Oppositional parties like the AFD claim, for example, that the government lost its ability to properly manage the German borders. Pictures, showing Merkel with an immigrant could symbolically provoke the assumption, that Merkel is responsible for the crisis or even could be the cause of the crisis.

Figure 36, Merkel / Weapons, Article 82

Figure 37: Election Poster Merkel, Article 101

4.2.5 Characteristics for Pictures used in the Context of Migration and Integration

The last part of the picture analysis focuses on pictures concerning topics about migration, which sets the last topic group out of all Sputnik articles. The articles mostly concern about ineffective immigration policies, a failing European immigration policy and take a stand on an event in Germany, that gave rise to a broad social 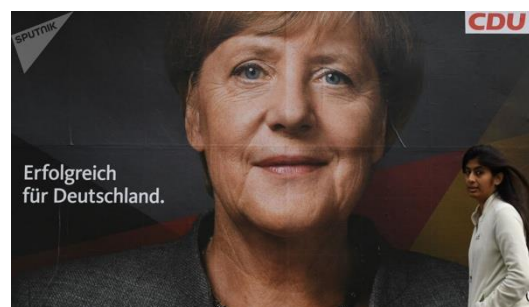debate. The cause for this debate was, that a German social institution (Tafel Essen) for free food for homeless people, excluded refugees from the service. The Tafel Essen declared, that they regularly exceeded their capacity for free food, because of the high demand, and therefore cannot sufficiently provide homeless people with food rations. Further, they stated, that in first line the government is responsible for the accommodation and nutrition of refugees and that they will therefore distribute the nutrition supply preferably to German passport holders. In the aftermath, this institution was heavily criticized by politicians and the society for putting preferences for people in need.

Especially the latter topic about the *Essener Tafel* was picked up by Sputnik several times. The pictures, used for this topic, show delivery vans of the institution and police cars. A striking feature is, that both photos are almost identical to each other. In both cases, the photos strongly associate the approach of the institution with the Nazi regime, as the word "NAZIS" stands in the focus of the photos. Regarding the theoretical framework, this could be understood as a (de-)topicalization of the original issue and as highlighting irrelevant details

of the story. There are only a few articles about the topic and therefore a significant further consideration of the used images is not possible.

Figure 38: Essener Tafel, Article 5

Figure 39: Essener Tafel, Article 160

In general, articles about migration strongly work with symbolic pictures and stereotypes. Refugees, especially woman are exclusively represented with a complete burqa. Other photos about migration show obviously scared children in combination of the German flag. Another photo shows a big group of refugees in front of the police. Also in a European context, the photos show many refugees with scared faces and life jackets, apparently sitting in a rescue boat. These photos have in common, that they highlight the negative aspects of migration. Like poverty, frustration and the dangers of the escape route through the Mediterranean Sea. Additionally, they represent the refugees as being different by wearing traditional clothes or the burqa, which fosters social distinctions.

Figure 40: Boy with German Flag, Article 179

Figure 41: Women wearing Burkas, Article 95

Figure 42, Refugee on a Rescue Boat, Article 203   Figure 43, Women wearing Niqabs, Article 11

Figure 44: Police and Refugees, Article 46

4.3   Representation of Actors

With regards to the theoretical framework, a continuously negatively representation, may it be by emphasising negative actions or characteristics of an individual, a political actor or an organisation, could be interpreted as forms of misinformation and manipulation, as only certain aspects of a story or an actor are highlighted. Especially, if this form of negatively representation of "others" is accompanied by the idealization or the positive representation of the own person (speaker) or the continuously positive representation of certain individuals or organizations, which a speaker opts for. As already mentioned, Sputnik Deutschland is a state commissioned news channel, paid and monitored by the Russian government. Therefore, actors, institutions and even countries outside of the Russian governmental sphere could be considered as the "other" and representatives of the Russian government or institutions like the army, could be interpreted as the "own" group. This research mainly focuses on the positive or negative representation of actions or actors, independently of the allegiance of the actor. The representation of the actors and actions of the actors is further analysed in accordance with the topic selection. This means, that the research aims to find out, which actors and actions, for example, in the context of the Syrian conflict, are positively accentuated and which are negatively emphasized. The analysis applies, pursuant to the topic selection on the Syrian conflict, EU and USA criticism and the Ukrainian conflict. Furthermore, positive and negative representations of actors and actions are analysed in the

context of German inner political actors and actions. This includes political issues, like migration and terrorism.

4.3.1 Representation of Actors and Actions concerning the Syrian Conflict

Throughout the Sputnik articles, a broad spectrum of actors, which are involved in the Syrian conflict, are mentioned. These actors are:

Al Quaida, Dschabhat an-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and Feilak ar-Rahman, ISIS, the Syrian Negotiation Committee of the Exile Opposition, the free Syrian army, the White Helmets, the "Media", the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the Russian Reconciliation Center, the Kurds (including the militant Kurdish group YPG), the United Nations Organization, Russia, the USA, Germany, Israel, Syria and Turkey.

As the composition of the actors is very complex and interwoven, the following part will present the findings from the coding pursuant to each actor.

4.3.1.1 Al Quaida, Dschabhat an-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and Feilak ar-Rahman, ISIS

These actors are exclusively represented in a negative way. Many articles highlight the brutal acts against civilians, especially in the region of East-Ghuta. (Article 65, 164, 198)

> As in East Ghuta, the fighters had forced the inhabitants to stay in Aleppo and used them as a human "shield". Article 198

Furthermore, several articles describe that terror groups are for example, tolerated and even supported by the "West" in political and financial terms. Especially the US is mentioned in the context of cooperation with terroristic groups. (Article 161, 215, 240)

> The West is fighting the former Nusra Front, but at the same time, with the Ahrar al-Sham, it supports a group "which uses exactly the same program and methods, and which obviously has taken over a large number of fighters from the former "Islamic State". Article 215

> The Ministry of Defense in Moscow again accused the US of protecting terrorists. According to Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin, the United States has transformed its controlled territory in western Syria into a "protected area" for terrorists. Article 240

Article 7 claims, that terror groups like *Dschabhat an-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and Feilak ar-Rahman* even intend to use chemical weapons, just on purpose to accuse the Syrian government and Russia later, as if they would have deployed chemical weapons.

> According to the center, provocations are being prepared by the terrorist groups Jabhat an-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and Feilak ar-Rahman. They are really preparing to use chemical

warfare in eastern Ghuta. We do not have a video yet to confirm this. However, we have information that they prepare the crime. According to this, the terror fighters are collecting old video footage of chemical weapons deployment in Barza, Aleppo and Ghuta. They will most likely be used in a new provocation to blame the Syrian and Russian Army. Article 7

4.3.1.2 White Helmets, the "Media", The Syrian Negotiation Committee of the Exile Opposition & The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights

Similar criticism is also expressed towards the "White Helmets". This actor, even if not further specified, is labelled as an organisation, founded by western nations. (Article 126)

In addition, the White Helmets are represented as a terrorist group. Regarding Sputnik, the White Helmets use people from the embattled cities and prevent them from escaping, as they want to use these persons as human shields against the Syrian government and Russia. Therefore, the White Helmets actively harm a peace process in the area.

> We were told that a working group of 'white helmets' is staying in Ghuta for a specific task, "Kasem said. The terror fighters in this suburb of Damascus "use people as a living shield. They want to do everything possible today to thwart the peaceful process of regulation. Article 7

Another claim by Sputnik is, that the White Helmets aim to defame Russia by spreading fake news and propaganda. Sputnik argues, that the White Helmets locally use actors to portray casualties and deaths, to make Russia responsible for the crimes.

> From time to time, however, video clips are appearing on the Internet, on which the "white helmets" lavish scenes, make up "affected people" and teach them what they have to say in front of the camera. Article 7

> No doubt it will continue to come to such fake news. Such news would probably be spread in social networks, referring to the "White Helmets",an organization established by the Western states – this organisation was linked to several false reports of alleged poison gas attacks. Article 126

> So, Western media has swiftly resorted to the slogans they had already used during the liberation of Aleppo: images of destruction, suffering children and heroic actors from the White Helmet troop flicker across the screens again. Incidentally, the White Helms are particularly successful in stunts with the living corpses, which regularly appear in different locations in front of new cameras. Article 160

> Suddenly "volunteers" of the very controversial "white helmets", who "rescued" people disguised as victims from the rubble in front of cameras, showed up. The "White Helmets" always appeared where the Assad forces were successful. Article 198

Several articles describe the negative influence of the media in the context of spreading fake news, propaganda and misinformation. Apart from this, the media itself is depicted as a unique actor, controlled and monitored by the west. The articles do not further specify, what Sputnik considers as "the Media". In accordance to Sputnik, the Media is a composition out of official news outlets, but also out of individuals, spreading news on social media networks. Overall, Sputnik represents the media as not trustworthy and liars. They serve the interest of the USA and the West and aim to defame Syria and Russia. The media obtains reciprocal relations to other actors, like the White Helmets. It could be clearly stated, that the media is negative represented.

> All these "fake news" are intensively, almost hysterically distributed by English-language media. They constantly report on "hundreds of children killed," on "massacres as in Srebrenica," on "surface bombing attacks," and so on, without relying on reliable sources. Article 198

> "In the media, there was already 'fake news' that chlorine was used in East Ghuta yesterday or this morning, citing some anonymous person who allegedly lives in the US. There will most likely be more 'information submissions'. And we know where they will come from. Their goal is to slander the government forces, to blame them for all sorts of sins, including war crimes, for what we are seeing in the eastern areas of Syria, where the US is already implementing a quasi-state scenario. " Article 198

> The Western media report the current fighting in the same pattern as the liberation of East Aleppo ... This pattern does not explain anything, but it is used all the time to "straighten things out, to moralize, of those who have just as little moral in this war as the opposite side does ". Ruf commented on the recent chemical claims against the Syrian government and related military threats from the West, saying that the case was "so terribly opaque". Article 215

Following the same line, Sputnik also claims that the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights is similarly linked with the West, as the Media or the White Helmets. Regarding Sputnik, a striking characteristic of this institution is, that they have their office in London and that only one person would be registered in the institution. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights is consequently represented as another source for fake news and propaganda, especially regarding the accuses of Russian and Syrian use of chemical weapons.

> Another source of false news about the situation in Syria could be the so-called Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, based in London. In this organization, only one person has been registered as a member who rents an apartment in the British capital, Lavrov said. Article 126

Finally, the Syrian Negotiation Committee of the Exile Opposition is delegitimized as an actor, as they refused to join the Sotschi and Astana peace conferences. Sputnik represents the actor as "a part of the problem", which prevents a successful peace implementation.

> Pushkov reminded the opposition that his group, like others, had refused to speak in Astanea and Sochi, which was a political solution that involved everyone. Article 59

4.3.1.3   Russian Reconciliation Centre and the United Nations Organisation

Nonetheless, several actors like the Russian Reconciliation Centre and the United Nations Organisation are predominantly positive represented. Sputnik points out several times for example, the humanitarian character of the Russian Reconciliation Centre. In general, the reconciliation centre closely works together with the Syrian government to support and help people from the embattled areas with aid supplies and medical care.

> The statement stated that the Russian Center for Reconciliation of the Parties, on behalf of Russian President Vladimir Putin, is launching an operation with the Syrian authorities to evacuate civilians, sick and injured from eastern Ghuta. Articles 191, 130, 164, 140

The centre is also portrayed as a regular target of terrorist groups. In another article, Sputnik notes, that the effective work of the centre is partially hindered by the USA.

> At the end of November 2017, the Russian Reconciliation Center in Syria reported that the US had isolated more than 50,000 people seeking urgent humanitarian assistance by closing a 55-kilometer zone around the US military base in At Tanf, Syria. Article 240

Moreover, several Sputnik articles refer to the United Nations Resolution 2401 and repeat multiple times the goals of the resolution. The respective text is one to one identical.

> The United Nations Security Council has adopted Resolution 2401, which requires congressional parties to "immediately stop the clashes" and to ensure a humanitarian break for a period of at least 30 consecutive days across the territory of Syria to give humanitarian aid access to besieged areas to make it possible for UN aid workers and their partners to bring war victims to safety. Articles 99, 110, 111, 124,

The articles emphasise the resolution principally positive and state, that Russia and Syria welcome the resolution and declare to implement the conditions to secure a peace process in Syria.

> Russia will work with the conflict sides in Syria for the ceasefire to take effect immediately. This was stated by Russian UN Ambassador Vasily Zizsja following the meeting of the UN Security Council, in which the relevant resolution had been passed. Article 99

However, in some aspects, the Resolution and the United Nations are also criticised. Sputnik describes the resolution frequently as too vague. It does, for example, not include explicit timeframes for ceasefires and does not clearly state which actors are considered in the resolution. Sputnik pointed out, that Russia would reject every attempt to protect terrorist groups, like ISIS.

> Russia had blocked this first draft on Thursday and presented its corrections. In particular, it has proposed specifying deadlines for the establishment of the ceasefire and emphasizing the need to "stop the clashes as soon as possible". As Russia's UN Ambassador stressed, Moscow will not allow an arbitrary interpretation of the adopted document. Article 99

> Russia had spoken out against the draft resolution and announced a veto - with the well-founded assumption that the document would suit the terrorists. Article 158

> Russia will vigorously fight against the erroneous practice of such dual standards, including through the support of the Syrian army for the final extermination of terrorist threats, the Russian Foreign Minister promised. Article 168

4.3.1.4 Russia and The United States of America

The USA is one of the actors in the Syrian conflict that is, besides Russia, most represented throughout the articles. The overall representation in this case is strongly negative, as the USA are highly criticised in many aspects. One concern of the Sputnik articles on this occasion is, that the USA try to downplay the military and political accomplishments of Russia and Syria in combating terrorist groups. Sputnik argues, that the USA demand the role of the "liberator" exclusively for themselves.

> After the huge success in Aleppo, the USA, Israel and some other forces (...) have tried to level out the achievements of the Syrian army, so that they cannot influence the political situation. Shortly after the liberation of Aleppo, the terrorists, with US support, conquered Palmyra for the second time. This was done with the aim of preventing Russia and Syria, to bring this success from Aleppo also to the negotiating table." Article 26

> The US wants to attribute itself to a clear victory over terrorism, while downgrading the role of Russia and its partners in the Syria regime as much as possible. Article 90

Other parts of the Sputnik articles assume, that the USA in fact aim, to divide Syria, oust the Syrian government from power and that the USA are pursuing their own interests.

> In all this, regarding Sluzki, the US is trying to "divide the country without really taking care of the needs of its people". Sergei Lavrov had previously stated that it looked very much like "the Americans in Syria are targeting the division of the country Article 90

Sputnik further describes broad concerns in the context of the military intervention of the USA. Different parts of the articles stress in that aspect, that the USA, unlike Russia, act in Syria without any form of legal basis. In addition, Sputnik emphasises the high numbers of civilian casualties due to the US Airstrikes. Altogether, the US military efforts lead to an increased activity of terrorism in Syria and increase the humanitarian catastrophe.

> In Syria, the Syrian army with the support of the Russian Air Force is leading the fight against the terrorist militia IS at the request of the official Damascus, whereas the US-led international anti-IS coalition is operating on Syrian territory without the permission of the lawful authorities. Article 90

> Air strikes by the US-led coalition in the Syrian province of Deir Ez-Tor killed 29 people. This reported the state news agency SANA. Accordingly, dozens of people have been injured. Affected are the settlements al-Sha'afa and Dharat Allouni east of the city Deir ez-Zor. Article 114

> These districts would have turned into recreational areas for fighters, "where yesterday's bandits, who exchanged black IS flags for the flags of "oppositionists", received medical treatment, reinforcing and retooling to terrorize the civilian population." Article 161

> In addition, the US did not allow aid convoys to the Syrian refugee camp Rukban, which is located near At Tanf. This, in turn, led to a humanitarian disaster in the camp, he continued. Article 240

The representation of Russia as an actor in the Syrian conflict on the contrary shows a completely different picture. First of all, the Sputnik articles highlight, in a continuously repetition of identical text passages, the rightful and legitimated military operation in Syria, as they act in accordance to the lawful elected government of Syria under Baschar Al-Assad.

> "It is absolutely inadmissible to put the life and security of the Russian military, who are in Syria at the invitation of the country's legal government, at risk to help fight the terrorists" Article 42

> The parliamentarian recalled, that Russia is doing so on a legitimate basis - at the request of the official Syrian authorities, "again unlike the US". Article 90

Besides that, Sputnik permanently puts attention on the diplomatic character of Russia. Consequently, Russia is represented as an actor that fosters the dialog between the conflict parties and is constantly endeavoured to foster peace negotiations in Syria. Also on this matter, many articles repeat the identical text passage, that Russia calls for restraint of all conflict parties to terminate the use of violence and prevent Syria of a further escalation of violence.

> At the Syria Peace Congress in Sochi, different political and social groups, as well as reconciliation militants from the Syrian protection zones are represented in comparison to the negotiations in Geneva, states Al Miqdad. In Geneva, only opposition had gathered, which had counteracted a political solution to the Syrian crisis. Russia has been able, within two years of working in our country, to establish relations with most armed groups, as well as with representatives of the external and internal opposition Article 26

> Moscow called on all involved parties to restraint and to avoid any action that could tighten the situation even further. "We consider unconditional respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria and the other states of the region." Articles 41, 42, 44, 50, 60

The representation of the military objectives is additionally clearly constituted. Regarding Sputnik, Russia is defending the sovereignty and unity of Syria and supports the Syrian government in the fight against terrorism. Also, the humanitarian aspect stands in the focus of the Russian government and the Russian forces in Syria. Several articles depict how Russia pledges for humanitarian corridors from the embattled areas in East-Ghuta towards Damascus and how Russia protects existing corridors. Throughout the analysis of the Sputnik articles, it became evident that Russia is portrayed as a victorious power, under the leadership of the Russian President Putin.

> In December, Russian President Vladimir Putin promised in a congratulatory letter to his Syrian counterpart al-Assad that he would further defend Syria's sovereignty and unity. Article 13

> The Russian Air Force provided crucial support to the Syrian government forces in smashing the terror caliph on the ground. Article 64

> Putin also informed Merkel and Macron about the practical steps taken by the Russian side to evacuate civilians, deliver humanitarian supplies and provide medical care to the affected population in Syria. Article 111

> The security of civilians leaving the Humanitarian Corridor is ensured by Russian military
> police and Syrian soldiers. Articles 164 191

The analysis of the actors in the Syrian conflict showed a strong unilateral representation of single actors. Several actors, especially the US, the media and the White Helmets are almost exclusively negative represented. Only the United Nations Organisation was depicted neutral, as the articles highlighted the positive intention of the resolutions, which are in fact, too vague and undetailed. Russia and the Russian Reconciliation Centre are permanently positively portrayed. Most articles highlighted the diplomatic and humanitarian character of these actors and emphasized the rightful involvement into the Syrian conflict. The most striking feature throughout the analysis has been, that certain information about the restraint and diplomatic character, but also about the implementation of the Resolution 2104 have been permanently repeated in identical text passages. Regarding the theoretical framework this could be considered as a significant reference for manipulation, as the same information regularly highlights the positive character of a single actor.

4.3.2 Representation of Actors and Actions concerning the Ukrainian Conflict

Sputnik´s attention in the context of actors in the Ukrainian conflict focuses mainly on three actors. First, "the West", including especially the USA, Europe and occasionally Germany, secondly the Luhansk and Donetsk People´s Republic. The third-mentioned actor is Ukraine itself. Russia is not directly mentioned as an actor in the context of the Ukraine conflict.

4.3.2.1 Ukraine

Throughout the Sputnik articles the Ukraine is generally portrayed as a weak state, unable to stop corruption and to sufficiently care for the Ukrainian people. Ukraine is presented as a state with a bad economy and unwilling or not powerful enough to implement needed reforms for the country. Even basic characteristics of modern states, like sovereignty and independence are doubtfully represented. Sputnik argues in several articles, that the Ukraine is not a fully accepted member in international politics or organizations and had fallen into the hands of other, western superpowers.

> Especially with the latter, the mood between the telephone partners may have been
> overcooled. Numerous Western politicians and international financial institutions increasingly
> accuse the Ukrainian government of failing to implement or even block agreed and promised
> reforms. Article 66

At the same time, the ex-president stresses that today's Ukrainian politicians are talking a lot about the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections, while ignoring the poor living conditions of the population and the catastrophic state of the economy.Article 81

For the US, Ukraine is obviously not even good for world politics, writes the columnist. From the point of view of the United States, this country has ceased to exist as a holistic entity - rules and norms that are common in dealing with other countries are simply waived here. Not only does it make that clear, writes Alxnis, that US governments can fire Ukrainian chief investigators with a snap - as in 2016, when then-vice president Joe Biden had replaced Prosecutor General Viktor Shokin. Such a thing is a normal situation for a country that has become the plaything of external forces. Article 36

With his gesture, the former US Vice President of the world has made it clear that in the eyes of the United States there is no Ukrainian state at all, writes the journalist. For the US, there is only the Ukrainian president, who puts Washington's decisions into practice. Article 36

According to Kuchma, Ukraine has never been a state in the true sense of the word. "The current situation of Ukrainians is terrible. Article 93

Sputnik also frequently represents Ukraine in the context of the Euromaidan Revolution in 2014. According to that, the Ukrainian government is brought into connection with campaigns to demoralize people from the Crimean Peninsula and East-Ukraine. Further, Sputnik refers, that even slaughters and violent crimes had been planned by the Ukrainian parliament.

These suggested that after the coup d'état in February 2014 in Ukraine, a scenario of intimidation of the Russian population of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine was opened. According to the lawyer, massacres and other crimes were planned. Article 102

In the perspective of the conflict itself, the Ukraine is significantly represented as an aggressor. The allegations towards the Ukraine range from not obeying the Minsk Agreements, isolating the state from relations to neighbouring states and illegitimately repressing east Ukrainians. Further, Sputnik states frequently, that the Ukrainian government intends to launch a military offensive against Luhansk, Donetsk and even Russia. Moreover, Ukraine uses so-called "Diversion Forces" and nationalistic paramilitary forces to undermine the autonomous regions in the East.

The Ukrainian military is currently preparing a large-scale offensive in Donbass. This is from a statement issued by the Ministry of State Security of the self-proclaimed People's Republic of Lugansk (VRL), which was released on Saturday. Article 55

> The law on the reintegration of Donbass adopted by the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament) aims to torpedo the Minsk agreements and does not lead to peace but to war. Article 77

> A branch of the Ukrainian nationalist organization "Right Sector" has invaded Makarovo near Lugansk, near the dividing line in Donbass, according to the People's Militia spokesman of the self-proclaimed Lugansk People's Republic (LVR) Andrei Marochko. Article 94

> The politician also expressed doubts that relations with neighboring countries, including Russia, could soon be normalized. But he is sure that at least the establishment of labor relations with neighboring countries will succeed if Kiev ceases its "policy of threats". Article 116

Not only Ukraine as a state is negative represented, but also the acting President Poroschenko. Sputnik claims with that regard, that Poroschenko owns several businesses even in Russia and would receive huge amounts of money from Russia. Therefore, his claims against Russia could be interpreted as hypocritical.

> According to the Ukrainian broadcaster, Poroshenko covers the ownership of several companies in the food industry in Russia - the country he blames for all evils and dubbed as an "aggressor state". Article 182

4.3.2.2 The West

The „West" is a regularly used term by Sputnik to describe the USA and several European member states, but also organizations like the NATO. There are only a few articles referring to the USA and the West, highlighting their provocative and aggressive attitude against Russia.

> "We fully understand what the Americans and NATO are doing - they are changing, that is the so-called 'dealer presence'. It is no secret that such a provocative activity became clearer after 2014-2015, after the events that took place after the return of the Crimea to the Russian port" Article 113

European states, like Germany or France play just a small and marginal role throughout the articles. Germany is mentioned only in the context of the Munich Security Conference 2017, whereby Sputnik states, that the West and Germany lost its interest in Ukraine.

4.3.2.3 People´s Republic of Luhansk and People´s Republic of Donetsk

Compared to the Ukrainian government also just a few articles represent the People´s Republic Luhansk and Donetsk. They are mainly represented as a minority group in Ukraine, under permanent attack of the Ukrainian forces and the West.

> "According to him, the saboteurs also intended to stop the evacuation of the peaceful population, in the case of warfare. In addition, according to Antonov, currently Ukrainian fighting technique is concentrated at the dividing line in Donbass. In addition, units of the Ukrainian armed forces are said to have foreign trainers. Diversion groups would become active, he added." Article 55

All in all, the representation of the actors follows the same patterns and structures like in the Syrian conflict. This means, that the West and Ukraine are represented in a predominantly aggressive and illegitimate perspective. They are also portrayed as responsible for the conflict, as they repressed minorities in the Ukraine and planned crimes especially in the east of the country and on the Crimean Peninsula. On the other side of the scale there are Luhansk and Donetsk, portrayed both very defensive and vulnerable. The patterns are not as strong as in the Syrian conflict, but also the Ukrainian case shows significantly preferences in the representations of the actors, which points out manipulative media characteristics.

4.3.3 Representation of German political parties

4.3.3.1 Coalition CDU/CSU/SPD

After the Bundestagswahl 2017 and the failed coalition between the CDU, FDP and the Green Party (Bündnis 90 / Die Grünen), the CDU aimed to form a coalition together with the second biggest party after the elections, the centre-left SPD. Sputnik refers just slightly to political processes in Germany. In a few articles they take a stand on the intentions of the new coalition. They highlight critics in that aspect, that the new coalition aims to invest enormous financial resources in the defence sector, instead of improving the life situation of the majority of the German people. Additionally, regarding the new coalition contract, the European Union as a political system is the top priority of the new coalition.

> "Andrei Hunko, the Left Party's Europe expert, suspects that the new grand coalition will focus more on rearmament and prestige projects than solving people's problems. The coalition contract mentions "Europe" 400 times, but nobody talks about the drastic social problems in Europe." Article 153

> "Also, the GroKo in spe considers the European Union (EU) still as an elite project. The people would come too short." Article 153

Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor and chairwoman of the CDU is weakly represented. Sputnik argues, that she massively lost consent under the electorate and is very contested, especially in the east of Germany.

"The Bundestag election last September has clearly shown that Chancellor Angela Merkel has massively lost support in East Germany, in all aspects." Article 206

But Sputnik also addressed conflicts and disputes within the coalition. In that context, Sputnik emphasized controversial approaches between the CDU and SPD, in the view of social policies and tax reduction. It is argued, that the SPD lost its title to be a worker's party.

"The middle class must be relieved, but the SPD blocks," he says in the Sputnik interview. Overall, there is little relief for workers. On the positive side, the CDU prevented tax increases." Article 189

"But that would be impossible with the coalition partner SPD. "The SPD has lost its connection to the labor class long time ago, he criticized. It no longer has an ear for the problems of the little people, but rather deals with internal personal fighting and the distribution of ministerial posts." Article 189

4.3.3.2 AFD

With regards to the AFD, the Alternative for Germany, only one article appeared within the research time on the Facebook account of Sputnik. It is noteworthy, that Sputnik describes the AFD as a far-right party instead of using terms like for example, "conservative" or "traditional".

"Who votes for AfD, is afraid of social decline and usually made his cross for the right party in the Bundestag election, without already being unemployed. The fear of becoming unemployed is a stronger motive for AFD voters than the concrete unemployment experience." Article 185

Regarding the Sputnik article, the AFD benefits from social fear of unemployment and social differences, for example, in the aspect of income. Many people with fears would vote for the "Alternative". Either way, the article concludes, that the AFD is, like the other parties, unable to address the true problems of the country and improve social equality and living standards.

4.3.3.3 Die Linke

Equally like the AFD, the socialist party Die Linke, just receives little attention throughout the Sputnik articles. But even in the few articles, Die Linke is, unlike all other parties in the spectrum, mainly positive represented. Thus, it could be stated, that Sputnik positively emphasizes for example the successful opinion polls for the socialist party. Even if opinion polls do not have a strong political importance towards the coalition building process, Sputnik

sensationally states, that Die Linke is currently the strongest political force in the German capital Berlin.

> "This has never happened before. For the first time, the left has become the strongest party in the German capital in the usual Sunday poll. If there were now elections in Berlin, the Socialists would make the governing mayor." Article 131

Sputnik also positively highlights a conference of the leftist party and welcomes the fact, that Die Linke is the only party in Germany, that remembers the 75th anniversary of the Russian victory over Nazi-Germany. Furthermore, Die Linke is represented as a diplomatic party, which instead of increasing the spending for the NATO and the military, calls for more diplomatic and friendly relations with Russia. The party is simultaneously represented as a strong oppositional party against the elected government.

> "The big hall in the Russian House of Culture and Science in Berlin's Friedrichstrasse was full. In front of about 500 guests, Volgograd´s mayor Andrej Kosolapov thanked the Left Party for being the only party in the Bundestag to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Stalingrad. The Federal Government was not known to make such a gesture." Article 232

> "The colloquium of the Left Party in the Bundestag dealt with the future of German-Russian relations on sunday. Fraction leader Sarah Wagenknecht and CSU politician Peter Ramsauer have demanded, among other things, an end to economic sanctions against Russia. They demand to approach Russia." Article 232

> "Exactly this quality in the relations between Germany and Russia reminded all participants of the colloquium. Sarah Wagenknecht was outraged that the sanctions against Russia are being used by the US quite blatantly for their own interests. The aim is to damage European, especially German competition, in order to unscrupulously enforce its own economic interests." Article 232

Even if in total only a few Sputnik articles have been linked to political parties in Germany, the analysis of the representation of the particular parties showed some findings. It could be stated, that the military sets one political issue, which has been frequently addressed in connection with the CDU/CSU, SPD and Die Linke. On one side, the CDU and SPD has been criticized for increasing the financial resources of the defence sector and on the other side, Die Linke has consequently been positively considered for their admission to reduce military financial costs. This topic is especially significant, as the results of an increased military spending, instead of stronger diplomatic ties towards Russia, have direct consequences for Russia. The articles did not include sufficient features, allowing to indicate whether one party

is represented predominantly positive or negative. The Findings show a slightly preference for Die Linke, which was depicted as a very successful party, calling for better relations with Russia.

4.4 The use of Words - Hyperboles, Metaphors, Rumours and Assumptions

The last part of the analysis investigates the language, used in the Sputnik articles. It aims to detect rhetoric strategies, negative word frames afflicted with prejudices, metaphors, unfounded or excessive assumptions and rumours. This part is especially important, as even small changes in the use of words can have immense effects on how recipients perceive news or stories. Stylistic figures, Hyperboles and metaphors foster vivid imagery, because they portray objects of articles in conceivable ways, which makes even complex issues easy understandable.

4.4.1 Use of Words

During the Sputnik articles, a broad range of words could be detected, which not necessarily describe the object of relevance in that article, but suggest something negative, interwoven and in connection with the original topic. These observations apply especially for the media, the government, the defence sector and for various politicians. The media for example, is not only described as the media. Sputnik frequently uses analogies and phrases for objects, which already set a relation between one term, in that case the media, and other objects or issues. With that regards, Sputnik uses different terms for the word "media", like *Staatsfunk (Article 12,)* (Staatsfunk, engl. = State Radio). This word already implements a relation between the state and the media. Namely it states, that the media in general is just the voice of the government, following their instructions without contradiction. Hereby Sputnik creates the narrative, that people, who do not agree with this preconceived opinions, would automatically be interpreted as *Kreml-Agents* (Article 38) by the German government. Thus, Sputnik produces a strictly dichotomous situation, in which every news and media consumer could whether be on the side of the state or on the side of the "free and critical" thinkers.

A further example for words, used in relation to the media is *Die Bertelsmänner,* (Article 22), which describes the media as a unified composition of various media companies, under one leadership, namely the Bertelsmann Media Company. The provided impression of the media supports the idea, that all news and media reports are brought into line by a higher power, in that case the Bertelsmann Company.

In another example, Sputnik names the police forces, which have been deployed at a demonstration *Staatsmacht* (Article 14) (Staatsmacht, engl. = State Power), which also contains suppositions of the forces, of being related to the government. Police forces do not depend on the government but on basic laws. In that context, the police forces are excluded from societal conditions and described as a tool of the government. In the same article, the police forces are also termed as *Erfüllungsgehilfen* (Article 14), (Erfüllungsgehilfen, engl. = vicarious agent). This term equally excludes the police from the law context and indicates, that the police forces just serve in the will of a greater power, in that case the government. In particular, the word component *Gehilfe* (engl. = Assistant) suggests, that the police has in fact no objective view and therefore is managed by the government.

Also, governments and acting politicians are described with words, that provoke the assumption, that politics are something which is non-negotiable. One article for example describes the political intentions of the Austrian Chancellor Kurz as innovative, but even like this, these political ideas cannot be implemented, as they violate European politics, which are described as *die Linie* (Article 10), (Die Linie, engl- = the Line). By terming politics and politicians as the Line, the system (Article 58), the establishment (Article 69) or the elites (Article 81, 93, 112) the speaker creates a feeling of being excluded from this processes and thus controlled by politicians. Though especially democratic states offer possibilities and ways to participate in decision making processes. Politicians are often linked to other objects, Merkel for example is portrayed as a patriarch or in combination with her epigones (Article 121, 131). The Ukrainian president receives the epithet "former chocolate-oligarch" (Article 54).

4.4.2 Hyperboles, Metaphors and Assumptions

The analysis further showed, that the use of metaphors and hyperboles are a basic component of almost all Sputnik articles. Negative political developments, like for example the housing shortage in German cities, is portrayed as a disease, eating its way through the districts.

> "Leprosy of gentrification eats into mature quarters and throws the old inhabitants out of their usual neighbourhoods." Article 47

Political institutions, like the US ministry of defence, the Pentagon, are personalized and described as hungry for money (Article 61).

Many articles also strongly work with assumptions. In that context, for example the sovereignty of Germany is contested (Article 112) or the USA is blamed for planning nuclear

offensives against Russia (Article 174). Sputnik never directly puts up an assertion but formulates their assumption as a question. Like this, Sputnik does not have to verify their assumptions and is not vulnerable, in the case a question leads to a negative outcome. For example, Sputnik sets the assumption, that the North Korean President travelled to Europe with a faked Brazilian passport.

"Kim Jong-Josef": Did North Korea boss travel to Europe as a Brazilian? Article 170

However, Sputnik did not formulate this as a statement, but as a question. The effects are nearly the same, as the reader of the article already grabbed the content. If it later turns out, that the information was wrong, nobody could blame Sputnik, as they questioned the information by themselves. This scheme of putting up assumptions and rumours by formulating the content as a question is one of the big findings of the research, as it could be detected throughout almost all articles of the research. This concept is further enhanced by referring to secret sources or to social media sources. Individual persons and unknown eyewitnesses are regularly picked up by Sputnik in order to put up "facts", that are not further verified. For example, one article concerns about a seemingly case of asylum fraud and the alleged implementation of the sharia law in Germany. The article puts up the assumption, that a paedophilic asylum seeker is multiple times married, which is in accordance to the sharia law. Further, as he has several wives, he receives more social assistance by the government. Sputnik comes up with the question if the sharia law is already a part of the German legal system, as multiple marriages are normally illegal, regarding the German law. Hence, Sputnik creates the assumption, that Germany partially implemented the sharia law, even if they did not directly express this issue as a statement. Furthermore, the only source for this article has been a Facebook post by Facebook user Tim K. (Article 95)

Following the same pattern, Sputnik also raises questions about the lying media (Lügenpresse) (Article 166), if England intents to cause damage to Russia as an act of revenge (Article 180), or if the Ukrainian government planned massacres against the people of East-Ukraine (Article 102) Therefore, the analysis clearly showed, that Sputnik systematically applies terms, hyperboles, metaphors or rhetoric methods, like formulating questions instead of statements, in order to intensify the story, portray political issues more dramatic or let issues appear in a sensational way.

5   Discussion of the findings

The coalition building process in the aftermath of the 2017 Bundestagswahl, the federal elections in Germany, proofed to be a complex and difficult task for political parties and candidates in charge. The first approach to form a new government, made from a coalition between the conservative CDU, the green party Bündnis 90 / Die Grünen and the liberal FDP failed, as the parties could not find compromises and agreements on fundamental political issues, like education, taxation and the refugee crisis. The leader of the FDP, Christian Lindner, arbitrarily declared the end of the coalition building process. After that, the possibilities to form a new government have been limited. Only a coalition between the CDU and the social-democratic SPD or new federal elections, with an uncertain outcome, remained.

To further describe the complex coalition building process and which role social media manipulation could play in that aspect, a detailed look in the outcome of the elections is necessary beforehand. The overall participation in the elections has been 76,2%, which means that only 46.976.341 million people out of 61.688.485 eligible voters gave their vote. After the assessment of the votes, the CDU received 200 seats in the parliament, SPD 153, Die Linke 69, Die Grünen 67, CSU 46, FDP 80 and the conservative-right AFD 94 seats. Later, two candidates of the AFD left the party and became independent members of the parliament (Bundeswahlleiter, 2017).
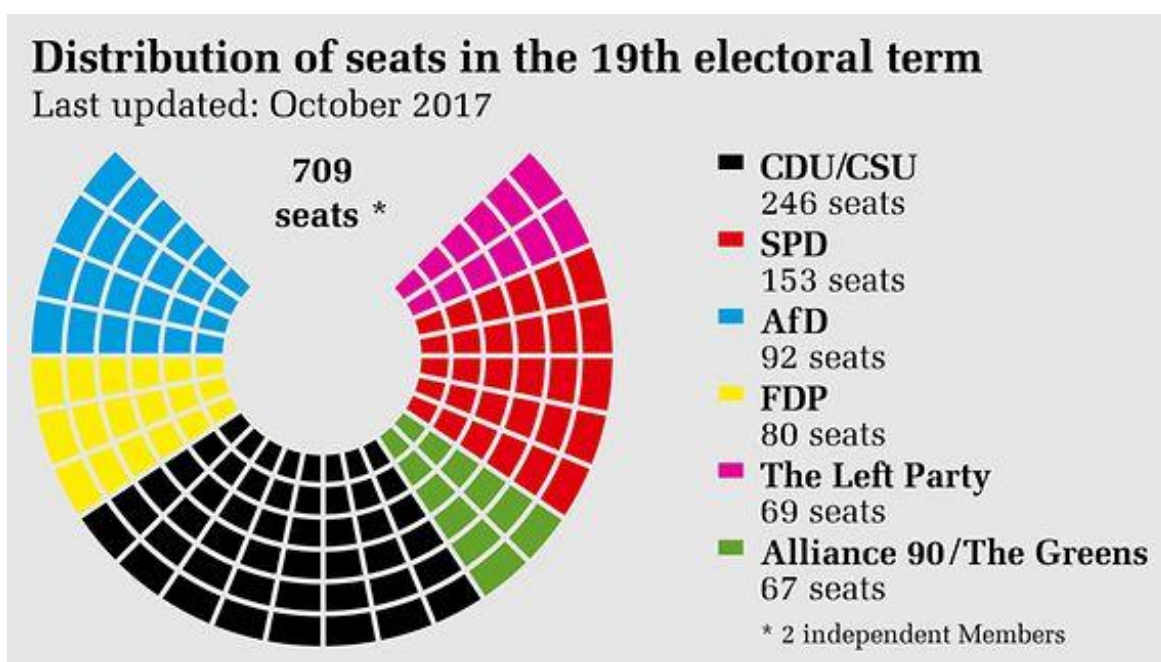

Figure 45: Distribution of seats in the 19th electoral term in Germany

As the Union of CDU/CSU and the SPD have a notable lead towards other parties, the differences between the FDP, Die Grünen, Die Linke and the new AFD are relatively comparable. However, around one quarter of the persons entitled to vote, namely 23,8% did not take part in the elections (Bundeswahlleiter, 2017). Regarding several studies, the non-voters are made from primarily young people between 18 and 29 years. Also, the amount of low educated people in difficult circumstances of life is significantly higher amongst the non-voters. Finally, there is also a gap between the single federal states, called the Bundesländer, in Germany. While the voter turnout in the west of Germany has been 77,4%, only 72,48% of the people in the east of Germany voted (Bundeswahlleiter, 2017). Summarized, the votes and support for the biggest parties CDU/CSU and the SPD have been on the lowest level since the elections in Germany and the biggest cluster of the 14.712.144 million non-voters represents young people, with a low social status, especially from the east of Germany.

This information is especially interesting in the perspective of several points from the theoretical part of this thesis. The first point is, that predominantly young people use the internet and social media platforms for political information. Stark and Bergerhoff (2017) even stated, that around 55% of young people in Germany declared, to use the internet as the primarily source. But young people are also the biggest group of the non-voters. The second point is, that especially undecided and politically low informed individuals constitute a rewarding target for interest groups and politicians, which aim to win their votes in the election. Both aspects match within the group of non-voters in Germany. Social media platforms generally offer great potential for all politicians and media outlets to address exactly this group of young and undecided voters. Therefore, the findings of the analysis of 240 post are additionally interesting and important, as already a small mobilization of young people through social media information could have a huge impact on the political outcome, not only in elections but also in the aspect of support for a coalition building process.

5.1 Finding 1: The Sputnik posts undermine the governmental legitimacy

The topic selection of the posts also remarkably shows, that Sputnik picks up topics, which are contrary against the official political narrative of the ruling parties. The posts mainly deal with Euro-Scepticism, critical positions towards German foreign policies, especially in the context of NATO engagement, the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria and finally about inner political issues, like the management of refugees and asylum policy. The topic selection could therefore be interpreted as a direct critic of the CDU/CSU and the SPD, which support the European Union, strong and positive relations toward the European member states and the

USA, as well as a strong commitment regarding the NATO alliance. In turn, it seems like if the Sputnik Posts actively support political positions of the AFD, which equally criticises the government for their policies, but also the left Party Die Linke, which call for less NATO and EU commitment. The topic selection itself increases therefore the political resistance of the governmental parties and could minimize support, consent and approval for political agreements, which must be made in the coalition building process.

Further, as politicians and parties do not want to risk a decline in legitimacy amongst their voters and care for their image, the public opinion towards political issues, which is also fabricated during the Sputnik Posts, becomes enormously important. Therefore, fabricated opinions and political criticism could finally make its way in the political agenda of the government. The strong right-conservative positions of the CSU towards the refugee policy, could be an indicator for the implementation of the beliefs of the people, which are promoted, amongst other, by Sputnik Deutschland.

5.2 Finding 2: The Sputnik posts emotionalize the political discourse

The findings of the picture analysis of the Sputnik Deutschland posts must be critically interpreted. The pictures speak a simple language. The USA, the NATO and several politicians, like Merkel and Macron are regularly negatively represented. Sputnik uses strong pictures, which trigger feelings and emotions amongst the recipients. The US military for example is exclusively represented in a dynamic way. Soldiers are always heavy armed or shown in scenes of combats. Sputnik Deutschland instrumentalizes these pictures to link the content of the articles directly with negative feelings and emotions, which strengthens the political position of the content of each article. Especially young and political uninformed people could be manipulated in that way. Additionally, by addressing political issues in an emotional way, the objective and fact based consideration of political issues is weakened. In an overall sense this could lead to a simplified political discourse, where not the best arguments or ideas find their way in the political decision making process, but ideas and political positions which evoke the most feelings or which produce the biggest fears. This trend could already be observed by an increase of populistic parties and politicians within Europe and the USA, for example the Brexit referendum. The deterioration of the political discourse and the accompanying practice of overtopping statements could foster more radical positions within the government and the people of Germany.

5.3   Finding 3: The Sputnik posts encourage political segregation

In the aspect of the political discourse around the governmental building process, the Sputnik Deutschland articles could also be interpreted as a factor, that leads to a stronger political exclusion of individual population groups. It must be stated, that several Sputnik Deutschland articles continuously represent specific actors, political ideas and beliefs in a drastic and permanent negative way. Thereby, Sputnik regularly refers to "People in the frontline", "unknown eye-witnesses" and "self-proclaimed experts". A second method of Sputnik, to create negative images of specific political issues and politicians is to camouflage their accusations as questions. For example, Sputnik did not assert, that a US Airforce Base in Portugal is responsible for a higher rate of cancer diseases around the camp, however, by asking if the airbase produces cancer, they directly linked the airbase with the disease. Many articles work in the same way, according to that Sputnik puts up discussions if French president Macron tries to conquer Europe or if German chancellor Merkel is a puppet of the media industry. Apparently, these allegations are not illicit, but do not comply with journalistic standards, like mentioned by Teun A. van Dijk or the Pressekodex, as there are no or doubtful sources or facts behind the questions and allegations. The overall notice of these striking representations and negative links is, that Sputnik contributes to opinions, which are outside of the political disputable field. It seems, if Sputnik provokes their recipients to take the decision, whether they discuss political issues on the foundation of democratic principles or if they reject this basis in advance. This means, that an individual, which beliefs that Macron´s suggestions towards reforming the European Union are in reality an attempt to conquer the other European member states, is not willing to discuss neutral and objective political facts. The same counts for Germany. If large parts of the society belief, that the refugee crisis is fabricated by the US and that the ruling government in Germany supresses the people, then there is less ground for target-oriented discussions and political consent. Sputnik posts, containing such radical opinions and content, therefore foster political segregation of the society and boycott political decision-making processes. Further findings, like the use of words and metaphors additionally underline this argument. In several articles, it could be shown, that Sputnik describes the German government as the "Elite" or the "Line", which the German people have to follow. By doing so, the recipients equally get the impression, that they have no influence on the political direction of the country, as the political discourse is unchangeable determined by a "higher class" or "masterminds" in the background.

Summarized, the analysis of the total 240 Sputnik articles demonstrably showed that many aspects of manipulation during the time of the coalition building process in Germany could be detected. In detail, there have been indicators of supernormal critics towards the ruling parties in Germany and the government and attempts to emotionalize the political discourse and thereby foster irrelevant political discussions. Especially the influence of the Sputnik Deutschland articles in the view of political segregation constitute an enormous risk for further political decision-making processes.

6   Conclusion

This research aimed to find out, whether social media news channels have a manipulative influence on societies, and if so, how this is conducted. To find adequate answers for these questions, some preliminary considerations had to be taken first. Especially as the term manipulation is object to various research fields and differently interpreted, a theoretical framework had to be elaborated. Van Dijk´s triangulated framework, including social, cognitive and textual dimensions of discourse manipulation turned out to be specifically useful, as precise indicators of manipulation could be derived. These indicators did not only focus on linguistic ways of manipulation, like the word framing of political objects, negative and positive representation of actors, but also included pictures, which equally could transport for example, ideological perspectives and political opinions in manipulative ways. Moreover, the theoretical framework provided clarification about the strong influence of public opinion towards political decision making and underlined, that public opinion is especially important for this process during times of political elections and government building processes. In addition, it had to figure out, which role the internet and in particular social media platforms play in the context of information access and opinion building. Hereby, especially the dynamics of cross media relevance, speed of information distribution and the enhancing effect of echo chambers and network clusters led to the result, that social media platforms enable news channels to strongly influence and also manipulate huge parts of the society.

The analysis of this research focused on the news channel Sputnik Deutschland, which frequently publishes news articles on social media platforms. The sampling collected relevant articles between the first of February 2018 and the 3rd of March 2018, the exact timeframe for the coalition building process in Germany. In total, 240 Sputnik articles have been coded and analysed regarding the theoretical framework.

The results in the first point, the topic selection, showed the distributions of political issues, which are addressed in the articles. Topics like the Syrian conflict, the Ukrainian conflict or European and NATO security politics, clearly dominated the frequency of the presented political issues. Therefore, some topics appear more salient to the public as others. But the more interesting aspect has been, how the different actors have been interpreted, within various topics. The USA and Europe, but also non-governmental actors have been portrayed as predominantly aggressive actors, which illegally intervened e.g. in Syria. These characteristics have equally been transported in the photos of the articles. Every photo of the

US forces has been linked to weapons and combats, whereas Russia and its allies have been portrayed in humanitarian situations. The generally and frequently representation of actors as negative or positive was one of the most obvious findings during the research and could clearly be considered as an indicator for manipulation of public opinion. Finally, the way of utilizing rhetoric stylistics once again reinforced the portrayed picture of Sputnik´s "reality". This in fact could be identified, for example, in the wording of certain political issues or the framing of actors, like the media. The latter has been described as a tool of the government and regularly been connected to lies and fakes. Assumptions and rumours complete the manipulative range, that could be detected. It turned out, that several articles are based on unconfirmed social media sources or unnamed individuals. It must be noted, that Sputnik did not sell assumptions or rumours as facts. However, they presented the most sensational topics and claims as questions, and thereby created the possibility of being true, unless the opposite is proven. In that context, Sputnik created the assumption, that the sharia law stands above the German law, referring to an individual social media user. The way how Sputnik applies rumours and assumptions could be interpreted as a violation of social norms, which have been mentioned in the theoretical framework. After all, an illegitimate form of persuasion, by hindering the recipient to get full access to the sources of the information. Therefore, it could be characterized as a form of manipulation.

7 Annex

7.1 Coding Scheme

Code / Label	Description
Layout – Picture negative	Disparaging picture of politicians (CDU/CSU and SPD) • Suspicious pose • Walleyed • Confused
Layout – Picture positive	Supporting picture of politicians (CDU/CSU and SPD) • Heroic • Looking capable of the situation • Smiling • Charming
Layout – Headline negative	Headline emphasizes negative details or aspects
Layout – Headline positive	Headline emphasizes positive details or aspects
Semantic - Positive "Self" – representation	Own Opinions or beliefs are beneficial highlighted; Positive Self-Representation: • Representing Russia positive • Representing Putin positive
Semantic - Negative "Other"- representation	Describing actors as: • Greedy • Ineffective • Corrupt • Aggressive

	• Unable •
Semantic – "Own" Positive – actions	Highlighting own good actions, e.g. : • Positive political outcome • Positive Speeches • Positive Investigations • Peaceful intentions etc.
Semantic – "Other" Negative actions	Highlighting "other" negative actions, e.g. : • Failures in Speeches • Failures in the outcome of policies • Failures in personal behaviour
Semantic – positive topic selection	News and Posts that support governmental outcomes, politicians, developments • Good diplomatic relations of governments • Reporting about political success of political parties • Reporting about positive poll results of parties • News about positive development of political issues
Semantic – negative topic selection	News and Post that criticize governmental outcomes in general, e.g.: • Criticizing slow development of political issues • Failure of all kind of policies (Counter-Terrorism, Integration, Refugees, Labor Situation)
Lexicon – positive word	Labeling "Own" beliefs, values or opposing politicians as: • Honorable

	• Dynamic • Successful • Capable • Beautiful • Talented • Right-minded
Lexicon – negative word	Labeling "Other" beliefs, values or politicians as: • Unlawful • False • Lying • Ambiguous • Suspicious • Incapable
Rhetoric – negative metaphors / hyperboles / rumours and assumptions	• The have millions of problems • There is a wave of refugees • They waste tons of money • They are so poor they cannot rub two cents together • Claims without evidence
Rhetoric – positive metaphors / hyperboles / statements, facts	• We bought the truth • We stand together like an Army • Verified Statements

7.2   Indicators Description

Theory	Concept	Definition	Indicators

"Discourse and manipulation Theory" Teun A. Van Dijk (Van Dijk 2006)	Textual and Cognitive Manipulation	1. Layout Manipulation
		
		Manipulation as defined here takes place through discourse in a broad sense, that is, including non-verbal characteristics. For instance headlines are typically used to express topics and to signal the most important information of a text, and may thus be used to assign (extra) weight to events that in themselves would not be so important.
		
		• gestures,
		• face work,
		• text layout,
		• pictures,
		• sounds,
		• music,
		• videos
		
		2.) Semantic Manipulation
		
		An overall strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation is typically used to support the speaker's or writer's own interests, while blaming negative situations and events on opponents or on the Others (immigrants, terrorists, youths, etc.)
			1. Layout Manipulation
			• Expressions: sounds and visuals
			  o Emphasize (loud, etc.; large, bold, etc.) positive/negative meanings
			  o Order (first, last; top, bottom, etc.) positive/negative meanings
			
			2. Semantic Manipulation
			• Overall interaction strategies
			  o Positive self-presentation
			  o Negative other-presentation
			• Macro speech act implying Our 'good' acts and Their 'bad' acts, e.g. accusation, defence
			• Semantic macrostructures: topic selection
			  o (De-)emphasize negative/positive topics about Us/Them
			• Local meanings Our/Their positive/negative actions
			  o Give many/few details
			  o Be general/specific
			  o Be vague/precise
			  o Be explicit/implicit
			• Lexicon: Select positive words for Us, negative words for Them
			• Local syntax
			  o Active vs passive sentences, nominalizations: (de)emphasize Our/Their positive/negative agency, responsibility
			• Rhetorical figures
			  o Hyperboles vs euphemisms for positive/negative meanings
			  o Metonymies and metaphors emphasizing Our/Their positive/negative properties

7.3 Data Sampling Articles 1-240 (Extra File)

7.4 Coding Extract (Extra File)

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