CHARLES UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism

Master's Thesis

2024   **Aren Melikyan**

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Televised Imperialism: Normalisation of Russian irredentism in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus through state-controlled Channel One's news journalism, following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine

Master's Thesis

Author of the Thesis: Aren Melikyan
Study programme: Erasmus Mundus Master in Journalism, Media and Globalisation
Supervisor: PhDr. Michal Dimitrov, Ph.D.
Year of the defence: 2024

Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on 30 July 2024   Aren Melikyan

References

Melikyan, Aren. *Televised Imperialism: Normalisation of Russian irredentism in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus through state-controlled Channel One's news journalism, following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.* Praha, 2024. 97 s. Master's thesis (Mgr). Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism. Supervisor PhDr. Michal Dimitrov, Ph.D.

Length of the Thesis: 137614 characters

Abstract

Amid growing authoritarianism worldwide, particularly in Eastern Europe, authoritarian regimes like Russia have effectively seized control over the media to shape public opinion. This thesis explores how Russian state-controlled television, specifically Channel One, normalises the state's irredentist doctrine and expansionist policies, thereby generating public support for them. The study analyses the primary frames and techniques employed by Channel One in its coverage of Russian irredentism, situating this within the broader context of the country's imperialist history and aspirations. Through systematic monitoring of Channel One's news coverage, the research examines the normalisation techniques of irredentism through prime-time news broadcasts of "Vremya." The findings discuss Channel One's active engagement of various societal segments in defining a "new and shared reality," introducing new "norms" and promoting them as universally supported, underpinned by a language of absolute truths, while completely excluding critical voices. The study contributes to the understanding of the normalisation process facilitated by state-controlled television in Russia, highlighting the role played by journalists and media representatives in this effort, both directly and indirectly. Furthermore, the thesis provides a foundation for research on the normalisation process through media, particularly television, within authoritarian and irredentist contexts.

Keywords

Irredentism, authoritarianism, normalisation, state-controlled media, Eastern Europe, Russia, South Caucasus, Ukraine, journalism

Title

Televised Imperialism: Normalisation of Russian irredentism in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus through state-controlled Channel One's news journalism, following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine

Abstrakt

V době rostoucího autoritářství ve světě, zejména ve východní Evropě, se autoritářské režimy, jako je Rusko, účinně chopily kontroly nad médii, aby mohly formovat veřejné mínění. Tato práce zkoumá, jak ruská státem kontrolovaná televize, konkrétně První kanál, normalizuje iredentistickou doktrínu a expanzivní politiku státu, a tím pro ni vytváří veřejnou podporu. Studie analyzuje primární rámce a techniky, které První kanál používá ve svém zpravodajství o ruském iredentismu, a zasazuje je do širšího kontextu imperialistických aspirací a historie země. Prostřednictvím systematického sledování zpravodajství Prvního kanálu výzkum zkoumá techniky normalizace iredentismu prostřednictvím zpravodajských relací v hlavním vysílacím čase. Zjištění pojednávají o aktivním zapojení různých společenských segmentů do definování "nové a sdílené reality" ze strany Prvního kanálu, o zavádění nových "norem" a jejich propagaci jako všeobecně podporovaných, podložených jazykem absolutních pravd, přičemž kritické hlasy jsou zcela vyloučeny. Studie přispívá k pochopení procesu normalizace, který v Rusku usnadňuje státem kontrolovaná televize, a zdůrazňuje roli, kterou v tomto úsilí přímo i nepřímo hrají novináři a zástupci médií. Práce dále poskytuje základ pro budoucí výzkum procesu normalizace prostřednictvím médií, zejména televize, v autoritářských a iredentistických kontextech.

Klíčová slova

Irredentismus, autoritářství, normalizace, státem kontrolovaná média, Rusko, Ukrajina, východní Evropa, jižní Kavkaz, žurnalistika

Název práce

Televizní imperialismus: Normalizace ruského iredentismu ve východní Evropě a na jižním Kavkaze prostřednictvím státem kontrolovaného zpravodajství Prvního kanálu

Acknowledgement

Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism FSV UK **Research proposal for Erasmus Mundus Journalism Diploma Thesis**	
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Expected date of submission (semester, academic year)
(Thesis must be submitted according to the Academic Calendar.)

Summer semester, 2024

Main research question (max. 250 characters):

How does the Russian state-controlled Channel One justify the country's irredentist claims in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus?

Current state of research on the topic (max. 1800 characters):

A year after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM) conducted research, claiming that 68 per cent of Russians supported their president Vladimir Putin's "special military operation" in the territory of Ukraine (VCIOM, 2023). From February 2022, this number had grown by 3 per cent. Despite the arguable credibility of VCIOM as a state-controlled centre, existing research on the topic from independent pollsters confirms the Russian majority's massive support for the invasion of Ukraine (Levada Center, 2023). In another research, 75 per cent of Russians stated that Donbas (Eastern Ukraine) is a part of the "Russian world" (Russkiy mir), an irredentist doctrine of influence of Russian culture, language and the Orthodox church beyond the country's borders. Breakaway regions at Russian doorsteps; Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia were also listed as parts of the "Russian world" (VCIOM, 2014).

The existing research argues that public opinion in Russia is "effectively shaped" by the country's national television, with top-watched federal channels being controlled by the state (Lipman, 2009). At the same time, television remains the main source of information for most Russians, having the eyes of 72 per cent of the population (Volkov and Goncharov, 2019).

While there is a significant amount of research on Russian propaganda, it has mainly focused on disinformation, with an extensive look at Ukraine. The frames that Russian TV uses to justify the country's foreign policy in smaller neighbouring countries are usually overlooked, and research is needed to understand the methods applied by the state-owned media to normalise Russia's expansionist policies in other Eastern European and South Caucasian countries.

Expected theoretical framework (max. 1800 characters):

Existing research suggests that public opinion is influenced by the way news media convey chosen frames (Olmastroni, 2014). In understanding the process of normalisation of a certain policy, it is necessary to study frames that, as suggested by Entman's framing theory (1993), promote an interpretation of a problem definition, and causes, make moral judgements and suggest recommendations, by selection and salience of communicated information. Decoding the media representation frames and analysing them as structures of meaning-making storytelling (Vultee, 2022) will help the research examine the means applied to construct news reporting to study the state-controlled channel's narratives propagated to normalise the state's policy for their audience.

As argued by Gerbner (1978), the repetitive nature of the messages can cultivate widely shared perceptions of reality, therefore alongside the framing, coverage will be evaluated through the theory of normalisation, as approached by Gavriely-Nury (2013); by testing the "means of an array of similar discursive strategies," or as earlier proposed by Fairclough (2010) as "capacity to 'naturalise' ideologies."

The legacies of Imperial and Soviet Russia play a key role in acquiring the present-day process of Russia's post-Soviet "regional integration," as well as is used to shape the perception of the country's "great power" status by striving for regional hegemony (Krichkovic, 2014), hence the qualitative research will also examine the collected data from the state-controlled television channel's broadcast through theories of imperialism and the notion of irredentism. The broadcasted messages will be scanned throughout, as suggested by Thompson's definition of nationalism (2000) in their "defensive" and "aggressive" nature.

Expected methodology, and methods for data gathering and analysis (max. 1800 characters):

To examine the frames used by the Russian state-controlled media to justify the country's policies in the selected regions, I will systematically monitor the prime-time news program of the Russian Channel One (Perviy kanal). Channel One is among the top-watched TV channels in the country (Volkov and Goncharov, 2019), and positions itself as the leader of the Russian-language broadcasting worldwide (Channel One, official website).

Although the channel broadcasts also political talk shows, the research will focus on the prime-time news broadcast, with the assumption that news reporting, by nature, is supposed to have a relatively neutral manner and formal tone. Taking into account that Russia holds "tight control" over national TV channels (Lipman, 2009), the analysis of the agenda set by the news broadcast and the frames used for the coverage will help to define the state's main messages. The news broadcast will be monitored in selected periods of political significance and will be accessed from the website of Channel One which stores all news programs. The main focus will be on the coverage of domestic and foreign news from and about the countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus (also known as Eastern Partnership countries).

Since the research focuses on the frames that the media applies to normalise the country's expansionist policy, the collected data will be grouped based on the similarity of the frames, and not necessarily on the country coverage. The collected data will be semiotically and visually analysed, to define the frames applied to the coverage to justify Russia's political interest or military interference in these countries of its former influence.

Expected research design (data to be analysed, for example, the titles of analysed newspapers and selected period):

The research is to outline the meaning-making irredentist frames and imperialist narratives communicated through the state-controlled media, hence the focus will be on the messages delivered by the state-controlled channel. The prime-time news broadcast, over the selected period, will be monitored depending on its agenda and relevance to the research. The main focus will be on the coverage of Russia's policies in relationship with the countries of the Eastern Partnership countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, as in the past, these countries had been a part of the Imperial Russian and/or the Soviet Union.

February 2022 will be marked as a starting point for the research period, considering the geopolitical shifts in the region following the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. To understand imminent ground-making for the invasion on the 24th of February and the frames used to normalise the aggression, the period between February 15, 2022, and March 15, 2022, will be monitored. To be able to analyse the possible change of frames, a similar timeframe will be monitored following a gap of another six months: from September 15, 2022, to October 15, 2022. This will also allow the research to examine the period of referendums organised by Russian-backed authorities in the occupied Ukrainian territories and the official annexation of 4 regions in Eastern Ukraine.

The same periods selected for the monitoring will be analysed with a difference of one year (February 15, 2023, to March 15, 2023, as well as September 15, 2023, to October 15, 2023). This will allow the analysis not only of the commemorative components of the coverage frame for the territorial expansion but will also cover the deteriorating situation in the South Caucasus, following the military escalation in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region, monitored by the Russian peacekeeping troops on the ground.

Expected thesis structure (chapters and subchapters with brief description of their content):

1. **Abstract:** a brief summary of the research topic and the keywords.
2. **Introduction:** The introduction will illustrate an overview of the research, will present the research problem and the question. It will also give a brief overview of the current political context in Russia's relationship with the Eastern European and South Caucasian states, including background information. The introduction will outline the research motivation, and objectives, and a preview of the paper's content.
3. **Literature review:**
   Literature review: An overview of researched and relevant literature on the topic, as well as findings of previous studies and the research gap (and question) the thesis will try to answer.
   The reviewed literature will discuss existing knowledge on:
     - Irredentism, "Russkiy mir" ("The Russian world"),
     - Imperialism, the case of Russia,
     - The media environment in Russia, the control over the state media,
     - The role of television in Russia and its perceptions,
     - The political geography of the Eastern Partnership countries,
     - Russian influences on these countries and the state narratives propagated in modern-day relationships with them.
4. **Theoretical framework:** Introduction of key theories that can be applied (and are relevant) to the research topic.
     - Framing theory,
     - Propaganda theories,
     - The concept of normalisation,
     - Myth-making and politics of memory,
     - Defining "aggressive" and "defensive" nationalism, application of imperialism theories
5. **Methodology:** Introduction of the chosen methodological framework to gather and analyse the data, justification of the criteria.
6. **Data analysis:** Research findings, grouped under sections discussing the main frames applied by Channel One.
   6.1: Frame N1: Overview of the frame and the contextual approach of its justification.
   6.2: Frame N2: Overview of the frame and the contextual approach of its justification.
   6- N/A: Other detected main frames.
7. **Discussion and Conclusion:** Critical analysis of the findings concerning the research question and hypothesis of the research, based on their significance. Assessment of the research limitations. The section will also discuss the gaps for future research. Summary of the main findings, outcomes and highlights of the research.
8. **Bibliography**

Basic literature list (at least 5 most important works related to the topic and the method(s) of analysis; all works should be briefly characterized on 2-5 lines):

1. Terras, V., & Thompson, E. M. (2000). Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism. *World Literature Today, 74*(3), 668. https://doi.org/10.2307/40156018
   The book overviews nationalism and colonialism in Russia. It also examines the techniques of Russian literature places it within the context of postcolonial discourse and theory, and defines colonialism and nationalism.

2. Wijermars, M. (2018). Memory Politics in Contemporary Russia. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351007207
   The book examines the memory politics in Russia, and its implementation as a means of political legitimacy. In addition, it examines the role of television and cinema in spreading these narratives.

3. Van, M. H. (2015). Putin's Wars. Rowman & Littlefield.
   https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442253582/Putins-Wars-The-Rise-of-Russias-New-Imperialism-Second-Edition
   The book offers a systematic analysis of Russian president Vladimir Putin's three wars (the Second Chechen War, the Russian-Georgian War of 2008 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014) in a broader historical context, exploring the dynamics of the Russian current regime.

4. Litvinenko, A. (2023). Propaganda on demand: Russia's media environment during the war in Ukraine. *Global Media Journal - German Edition, 12(2022)*(2). https://doi.org/10.22032/dbt.55518
   The essay analyses propaganda strategies and suggests the propaganda on demand concept, describing the manipulation of public opinion by using specifically tailored narratives.

5. Krzyżanowski, M. (2020). Normalization and the discursive construction of "new" norms and "new" normality: discourse in the paradoxes of populism and neoliberalism. *Social Semiotics*, *30*(4), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2020.1766193
The paper analyses the conception of normalisation and explores "naturalization" through the role of legitimation (or pre-legitimation) via social imaginaries.

6. Lipman, M. (2009). Media Manipulation and Political Control in Russia. *Carnegie Moscow Center*. https://carnegiemoscow.org/2009/02/03/media-manipulation-and-political-control-in-russia-pub-37199
The article overviews the Kremlin's control over the Russian media and describes the media environment in Russia under Vladimir Putin and Russia's media tradition. It discusses the use of the country's national television as a political instrument.

7. Entman, R. (1993). Framing: Towards Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm. *Journal of Communication 43 (4)*, 51-58. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x
The article defines the theory of framing and examines how frames work, identifies the tendencies of the use of the term while discussing the benefits of the common understanding of the framing concept. The article also examines how frames are acting in political news.

8. Vultee, F. (2022). A Media Framing Approach to Securitization: Storytelling in Conflict, Crisis and Threat. *Taylor & Francis*. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429469190
The author links the theory of media framing with the theory of securitisation and analyses the narratives around and between the disciplines. The introductory chapter of the book searches for the definition of "framing," and also introduces and defines "master frames," "generic frames" and "issue frames."

Related theses and dissertations (list of B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. theses defended at Charles University or other academic institutions in the last five years):

Chapman, J. S. (2021). *Evaluating Russian Foreign Policy Behaviors: A View of Eastern Europe Through the Mind of the Kremlin*, MA Thesis, Global Security Studies, Johns Hopkins University, http://jhir.library.jhu.edu/handle/1774.2/64197

Beggs, Connell, (2021) *Soft Power, Hard Times: Russian Influence in the Post-Soviet Space during Periods of Military Conflict*, Doctoral dissertation, University of Manchester. https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/soft-power-hard-times-russian-influence-in-the-post-soviet-space-

Alyukov, M. (2021) *Making Sense of the News Under an Electoral Authoritarian Regime: Russian TV Viewers and the Russia-Ukraine Conflict*, Doctoral dissertation, University of Helsinki, https://helda.helsinki.fi/items/04bee76f-122e-4eae-a59a-3550984e4e32

Date / Signature of the student:

05.12.2023

THIS PART TO BE FILLED BY THE ACADEMIC SUPERVISOR:
I confirm that I have consulted this research proposal with the author and that the proposal is related to my field of expertise at the Faculty of Social Sciences.
I agree to be the Thesis supervisor.

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Surname and name of the supervisor   Da

Further recommendations related to the topic, structure and methods for analysis:

Further recommendations of literature related to the topic:

The research proposal has to be printed, signed and submitted to the FSV UK registry office (podatelna) in two copies, **by November 15**, addressed to the Program Coordinator.
Accepted research proposals have to be picked up at the Program Coordinator's Office,
Sandra Lábová. The accepted research proposal needs to be included in the hard copy version of the submitted thesis.
RESEARCH PROPOSALS NEED TO BE APPROVED BY THE HEAD OF ERASMUS MUNDUS JOURNALISM PROGRAM.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Almost two weeks after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the experimental Russian band Shortparis released a video for their anti-war song "Apple Orchard." Its poignant lyrics metaphorically ask "Where is the country's edge?" questioning the nation's boundaries, while a choir of military-dressed men in the background signs about an apple orchard blossoming in blood. The anti-war sentiment the song reflects, however, as indicated by national surveys, is not widely shared within Russia. Public anti-war statements remain rare, usually met with repercussions, including imprisonment. According to a May 2024 research conducted by the Levada Center (2024), a Russian non-governmental research organisation, included in the Russian registry of "foreign agents," a majority of 79 percent of Russians approved the expansionist actions of their state in neighbouring Ukraine. Another survey by the Russian Fund of the Public Opinion (2022), regularly cited by the state media, found that 78 percent of Russians supported the annexation of the four regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson in September 2022. An alternative survey published by RBK suggested that more than three-quarters of those supporting Russia's so-called "special military operation" would like to restore the Soviet borders (Kuznetsova, 2022). These reported figures also reflect broader societal support for Russia's irredentist doctrine of the "Russian world" (Russkiy mir) (VCIOM, 2014), a political concept of the influence of Russian language, culture, history beyond the country's borders, and foregrounding dominance particularly throughout the former Soviet space (Marandici, 2020).

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 significantly shaped the world order, and Russia's position within it, an event Russia's president Vladimir Putin called "the disintegration of historical Russia" (Putin, 2021) and "the biggest geopolitical catastrophe" of the last century (Bigg, 2005). This imperial nostalgic view is shared by Russian elites, who see the Soviet Union's collapse as a challenge to Russia's "great power" status on the global stage (Sargamoso, 2020, p. 2). In this context, the Kremlin has aimed to (re)establish dominance over its immediate neighbours, including in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, as a prerequisite for greater international recognition (Götz, 2017). This process, to a different extent present in the 1990s, already in the mid-2000s transformed into hegemonic practices involving hard power and aiming to keep the formerly Soviet states within the Russian sphere of influence (Sargamoso, 2020, p. 3). Here, during the early years of Putin's first presidential term, the government began actively tightening its control over the media, introducing more intensive ideological messaging following 2011 anti-government mass protests, seeking to form a powerful top-down authority and align the country's main television channels with the top of that authority (Tolz & Teper, 2018). Previous research suggests that state-controlled media is essential for authoritarian regimes to maintain their domestic legitimacy and cultivate public support (Tolz & Teper, 2018). In Russia this control was particularly aimed at television, which has a dominant role as a news provider and remains the main source of information for most Russians, having the eyes of 62 percent of the population (Volkov et al., 2021), with top-watched federal channels being controlled by the state (Lipman, 2009). For certain Russian channels, this influence extended beyond the national borders to neighbouring countries, serving as an instrument for spreading Russian influence abroad (Kudors et al., 2010), as the news agenda in Russia is actively shaped by the Kremlin (Hutching & Tolz, 2015, p. 33-34). Among them, Channel One (Perviy kanal), in particular, broadcasted outside of the Russian borders targeting the communities worldwide, including in former Soviet Union states, for so-called Russian "compatriots," who are not necessarily Russian citizens but are users of the Russian language (Hutching & Tolz, 2015, p. 32) – a key for Russian irredentist movement. In this controlled environment, the discourse of imperial revival has emerged as a central element of coverage following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Klumbytė, 2023).

While political scholars have extensively studied the political justifications for the invasions of Ukraine and Georgia through political speeches and state propaganda in Russia, including the role and the discourse surrounding "compatriots," (e.g., Ambrosio, 2016; Burai, 2015; Zavershinskaia, 2024) there is a lack of journalism-centred research on how the

state-controlled television in Russia normalises the state's irredentist claims to territories beyond its borders and asserts political hegemony within the broader region. This study hypothesises that the Russian state-controlled television employs specific journalistic techniques and framing strategies to normalise the state's irredentist and imperialist policies towards Eastern European and South Caucasian countries, aiming to foster public support for its actions there both domestically and internationally. Given the high levels of reported support for the state's expansionist policies and dominance in the post-Soviet area, and the influential role of state-controlled television, this thesis poses the following research question:

How does the Russian state-controlled Channel One seek to normalise the country's irredentist policies in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus through news journalism following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine?

Through qualitative analysis, the thesis systematically monitors Channel One's prime-time news programme in different intervals over the two years following the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It examines how the Russian state-controlled Channel One, a flagship national television network, normalises the state's irredentist policies, particularly in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. The study identifies the key irredentism-related frames and the strategies used to cover these issues, and employed techniques of normalisation, which in this context is understood as a strategy for public discourse by use of the influence of dominant powers to shape social reality, legitimise social norms, define what is considered "the normal" and acceptable (Krzyżanowski, 2020; Taylor, 2009). A detailed definition of normalisation is discussed in the theoretical chapter of the thesis.

Although the narratives around Russian expansionism are not limited to the selected regions of the former Soviet area, or as it is referred to in Russia as its "civilisational space" (Sagramoso, 2020), the research focuses on six countries neighbouring Russia's southwest: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Formerly members of the Soviet Union, these countries have varying degrees of association with Russian integration policies, including for some the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), and are significant for understanding Russia's both geopolitical strategy and domestic discourse. In 2009 these six countries became members of the European Union's Eastern Partnership program, aimed at achieving the closest possible political association and economic

integration between these states and the EU (Europan Council, 2024), and to different degrees enhanced their relations with their Western neighbours and partners. This initiative came with strong opposition from Russia, which sees the region as a "strategic buffer zone" and aimed at Russian comprehensive effort to increasingly influence regional political rules, as well as developing its structural power in the region (Cadier, 2014).

The following chapters of the thesis outline the theoretical framework, review the existing literature relevant to the research question, and define key concepts, including Russia's policies in what it calls "near abroad," as well as the state's irredentist doctrine, the "imperial identity," memory politics, the media environment in Russia, and the role of television in it. Further, in the Methodology and Data Collection chapters, the thesis details the research approach, data collection methods, and timeframes. The concluding chapter presents the key irredentism- and imperialism-related frames identified in Channel One's new programme of "Vremya" ("Time") and categorises the techniques employed by the television in normalising them. The findings are followed by a discussion outlining the interpretation of the results, the limitations of the research, and the implications of findings for understanding the editorial approaches of normalisation by Russian state-controlled television within an authoritarian environment.

Literature and Theory

This chapter outlines the existing research and theoretical framework employed in this thesis to analyse the normalisation of Russian irredentism through the news coverage of state-controlled Channel One. It examines the existing literature on Russia's contemporary politics and their historical references in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, the settings in which the modern-day Russian media, particularly television operate. The theoretical section defines the theoretical dimensions of the study and provides an overview of the methodological tools employed in the analysis.

Russia's "empire identity" and irredentism

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, as formerly Soviet states one by one declared their independence from the Moscow-led union, left Russia "uneasy" within the territory of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), now the Russian Federation (Sagramoso, 2020; Kosyrev, 1992). For decades, most of these countries were within the domestic borders of a single state, and for some even before that, within the Russian Empire. Many Russians struggled to let this memory go, while others faced the challenge of being outside Russia's new borders, in the newly formed independent states (Toal, 2017, p.3).

Distinct from other empires of its time, Russia developed both as a state and as an empire simultaneously, due to its continuous colonisation along its borders (Sagramoso, 2020). Consequently, as argued by Sagramoso (2020), throughout much of its modern history, the Russian state and Russian national identity have been intrinsically linked to the imperial idea of the state. Scholars in history and political science frequently identified the expansion of the Russian state as a fundamental element to its historical development and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which resulted in the loss of vast territories under Moscow's control, left a profound sense of disorientation among Russians (Sagramoso, 2020, p. 2). In a 1992 publication of "Rossiyskaya Gazeta," the official newspaper of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation, journalist Dmitry Kosirev, reflecting on foreign politics of the newly independent Russia, wrote:

"The issue is not that till now we live in a state that feels within new borders as in a costume of someone else's size, but the psychological adaptation of the fact that Belarus, Ukraine and others are foreign countries and that the relations with them are foreign affairs, did not come easy, if at all" (Kosyrev, 1992, p.6).

Additionally, the collapse of the Soviet Union precipitated a social and economic crisis in Russia, which, as argued by Sagramoso, resulted in a profound sense of "national humiliation" among Russians, as the country's intellectual elites and politicians were generally inclined to agree on Russia's "great power" image and that it should be treated accordingly. By the 1990s, elements of neo-imperialism began to manifest in Russia's policies towards what is referred to as the "near abroad" — covering the territories of the former Soviet Union (Sagramoso, 2020). Toal (2017, p. 9) argued that the concept of "near abroad" should be viewed within the postcolonial geopolitical field — between the former imperial metropole and the former colony. In this context, as argued by Trenin (2011), Russia while recognising the former Soviet republics as separate states, in fact, does not yet see them as entirely foreign. So is the phrase "near abroad," in Russian blizhnee zarubezhiye (ближнее зарубежье), literally meaning "near beyond border," emerged shortly after the dissolution of the Union. It acknowledged the difference of the newly independent states, and at the same time highlighted their proximity, and as argued by many, was another expression of Russia's longstanding ambition to maintain a sphere of influence over neighbouring territories (Toal, 2017, p. 3).

One means of asserting this increasing policy of influence in its neighbourhood was through Russia-backed integration processes, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), seen by Putin as "a project for maintaining the identity of nations in the historical Eurasian space" (Putin, 2013; Feklyunina, 2016). The EEU, along with other earlier established organisations like the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) that particularly intensified under Putin's rule, aimed at maintaining the Kremlin influence in the region, as the space of Russia's "special interest." These "integrational projects" were characterised by Sagramoso (2020, p. 3) as "neo-imperial." Furthermore, Kolesnikov (2023) described the contemporary Russian state's ideology as "imperialist-nationalist" — intertwining imperial aspirations with national sentiment. In this context, the Russian political elites expect loyalty from their former "colonies," which extends beyond the purely political character and includes the knowledge of the Russian language and solidarity in Russian efforts against the West. Opposition to this

cultural dominance and attempts at independent foreign policy, as well as disagreement with the Russian view of the Soviet Union are perceived as political disloyalty (Kassymbekova & Marat, 2022).

Especially under Vladimir Putin, this cultural memory and representation of the past has been increasingly employed to claim political legitimacy for the country's ruling elites, and is one of the defining features of Russian present politics, as it is "frequent recourse to Russian history as a rhetorical toolbox for framing and justifying policy decisions" (Wijermars, 2016). The historical narratives supported by Putin's government aim to establish a present-day political legitimacy for the regime's focus on centralised leadership and the concept of Russia being a "great power." Alongside, this narrative also promotes the victimisation idea of the "Great Russia" (Velikaya Rossiya) being under constant threat from both domestic and foreign "enemies" (Wijermars, 2016). The memory applications of "Great Russia" under threat have become a core aspect of Russian politics, with television and cinema playing pronounced roles as "prolific suppliers" of these historical narratives. The Kremlin intensely turned to history to strengthen its legitimacy in crisis (Wijermars, 2016), and for instance, made the memory application of the Second World War (or as called in Russian the Great Patriotic War) among the primary resources for framing the conflict in Ukraine, framing for instance Ukraine's government as "fascist" (Gaufman, 2017).

The Kremlin propaganda portrays Russia as entitled to regional dominance over former Soviet territories and within this "imperial imagination," the imposition of Russian language, culture, and rule over the non-Russian population is portrayed as not colonialism, but a "gift of greatness." This framing of primacy aligns with the concept of the "Russian world" (Russkiy mir) - an imagined community rooted in the Russian language, culture and a shared "glorious" past, creating a hierarchical relationship between Russia and other imaginary community members (Feklyunina, 2016; Marandici, 2020).

In his essay published eight months before invading Ukraine, Vladimir Putin (2021) described Ukraine and Russia as sharing "the same historical and spiritual space," expressing a "firm belief" that Russians and Ukrainians were "one people." The Russian president characterised the recent divide between the two countries as a tragedy. Alongside the Ukrainians and Russians, Putin also included Belarusians among the descendants of Ancient Rus. In his text, he asserted that Ukraine was "shaped — for a significant part — on the lands of historical Russia," which he claimed Russia was "robbed of." With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent independence of the states, Putin argued that people overnight were taken away "from their historical motherland." Putting in the context of

domestic developments in Ukraine following 1991, he referred to the military actions in Donbas and Luhansk, which started in 2015, as a defence of "their home, their language and their lives." A reference we later will return to when analysing the Channel One coverage.

Putin's declared intent to "protect" the interests of Russian compatriots abroad, in the past, had already evolved into a foreign policy objective justifying the use of military force when the country 2008 entered a war with Georgia. The emphasis on "Russian speakers abroad" was employed as justification for the annexation of Crimea (Pieper, 2018), completing an irredentist project (Ambrosio, 2016). These assumptions of links between place, culture, and national identity framed within territorial arguments, are a prime example of irredentism, as defined by Storey (2017), a concept of a state's or ethno-national group's claim to territory that is currently within borders of neighbouring state. The core components of Putin's (2023) arguments are also summarised in his definition of the "Russian World" which aims to unite everyone who feels a "spiritual connection" to Russia and "who consider themselves Russian speakers, and carriers of Russian history and culture regardless of their ethnicity or religion," making it a transnational concept. Andis Kudors (2014) summarised the "Russian World" as a "supranational structure that consists of Russia, the Russian diaspora living abroad and other so-called Russian-speaking communities, which consider Russia as their cultural and spiritual centre." And while Russia is considered "the heart" of this community (Feklyunina, 2016), the head of Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill (2009) for instance referred to Ukrainian, Belarusian and Moldovan cultures as "organic" parts of the "Russian World."

As seen previously, in the Russian elite's attempts to delineate the doctrine of the "Russian World," the concept definitions vary. The notion of the "Russian World" (Russkiy mir) was formulated as early as the 1990s, in parallel to, but independent from Russia's law on *compatriots* (Kudors et. al, 2010). Over time, the approximately 25 million ethnic Russians, that after the fall of the USSR found themselves living outside of the Russian borders, in the newly formed independent states, served as leverage for the Russian authorities to engage in policies aimed at "protecting" their rights abroad (Sagramoso, 2020, p. 2), using its diasporas as a tool for achieving geopolitical objectives (Pieper, 2018). Particularly, the concept of the "Russian World" got a new interpretation in 2008, with the war between Georgia and Russia, and again in 2014, with the annexation of Crimea, the war in Eastern Ukraine and eventually followed by the full-scale invasion by Russia in 2022. Russian co-ethnic and language speakers abroad were instrumentalised and united under the

umbrella of the "Russian World" to justify the military interventions of neighbouring countries (Pieper, 2018).

The definition of the term "compatriots" remains fluid, encompassing not only Russian speakers, ethnic Russians, and individuals with cultural ties to the "homeland" and the "Russian world," with emphasis on cultural, rather ethnic markers, as argued by Feklyunina (2016), but also those who have origins in the former "united" state – the Soviet Union. This expansive definition provides Russia with much freedom in interpreting the scope of its irredentist claims (Pieper, 2018). In brief, as articulated by the Russkiy Mir Foundation, "the Russian World is the World of Russia" (Russkiy Mir, n.d.). In promoting this *World*, Russian authorities, have not only pursued the "integrational" efforts but also the Russian-language media as one of the strategic tools of influence (Feklyunina, 2016). In this context, Russian national television, in particular, serves as a pivotal platform, extending its reach beyond national borders and beyond domestic community building, and contributing to shaping external perceptions in line with the foreign ambitions of the ruling elites (Hutching & Tolz, 2015). The following chapter provides a more detailed examination of the role of television within the Russian media environment.

Contemporary media landscape in Russia

In its 2004 report, the non-profit human rights advocacy organisation Freedom House downgraded Russia's freedom status from "partially free" to "not free," a status that has remained unchanged ever since. The Russian government controls all national television networks, the majority of print outlets, and radio stations (Freedom House, 2024). The media environment in the country is widely recognised as "substantially oppressed by the state" (Savin et al., 2018). Although the Russian Constitution guarantees freedom of mass media and prohibits censorship, as well as allows lawful seeking, receiving, disseminating and producing of information (Russian Constitution, Article 29, n.d.), in practice, the regulations and laws on "extremism," "foreign agents," or "undesirable organisation" significantly limit media operations in the country (Freedom House, 2024). In 2012, Russia introduced the "foreign agents law," which labels any organisation receiving funds from abroad as a "foreign agent." The media environment became even more restrictive following the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In March 2022, the Russian parliament passed two laws criminalising the dissemination of "knowingly false information" about the Russian army and state institutions abroad, as well as introducing administrative liability for "discrediting" the Russian army (The State Duma, 2023). The Russian federal executive agency responsible for monitoring, controlling and censoring Russian mass media (Roskomnadzor) blocked dozens of both domestic and international media outlets because of the law "violations," including independent Russian outlets Meduza, Mediazona, as well as Western media outlets such as the BBC and the Deutsche Welle, as well as social networks, including Twitter, Facebook and Instagram (Pasti, 2024).

The introduction of these laws against "discrediting" the Russian army, in practice made any independent reporting that diverged from the official view of the Russian government on full-scale invasion or what they call "special military operation" illegal. Article 280.3 of the Criminal Code criminalises the criticism of Russian military or state authorities operating abroad and can lead to fines between one or two years of income or salary, compulsory work for a term of up to three years, and arrest for up to six months. The penalties are more severe if the "discrediting" results in "mass violations of public order and/or public safety." In this case, the person, as well as the journalist who published the information may face a fine of up to three to five years income, or potential imprisonment of up to five years (Committee to Protect Journalists, n.d.).

Pallin (2016) argues that restrictive media laws in Russia tend to have vague formulations and are implemented selectively, resulting in a climate of ambiguity. This policy of uncertainty also leads to increasing self-censorship by journalists (Bodrunova et al., 2020; Litvinenko & Toepfl, 2019). A 2014 research conducted by Schimpfössl and Yablokov found that many reporters working for pro-government publications "have chosen to" convey the Kremlin narratives "deliberately," viewing self-censorship as a form of professionalism (Bodrunova et al., 2020; Schimpfössl and Yablokov, 2014). On the contrary, those who refused to comply with the state restrictions have either preferred to close, or some left Russia, while others submitted to military censorship. The media landscape of outlets operating from within the country has been cleansed of independent reporting and dissent, and limited to operations from exile and often disseminated by social media platforms such are Telegram and YouTube (Litvinenko, 2022). Although more people, particularly the younger generation, turn to social media, especially Telegram channels, for news, television remains the main and most trusted source in Russia (Levada Center, 2024). Despite the declining direct influence of television, as argued by Volkov (2021), within the information vacuum created by the restrictive laws in the country, the impact of state-controlled television can not be underestimated. Kiriya (2014) notes that television dominates the public sphere in Russia, with authorities focusing more on controlling content in "general audience media" than on the Internet. State-owned media heavily influence the agenda of online media by generating a large share of messages that are copied by other media sources, including the Internet. Hence, the state-controlled media predominantly sets the agenda for online media outlets operating within the country (Kiriya, 2014).

As a result, the media landscape in Russia is homogeneous, with the state-controlled channels applying similar frames and viewpoints on significant political events, both domestic and foreign (Kiriya, 2014; Savin, 2018). This orchestration and application of similar frames is also due to the Russian government has long used the tradition of *temniki* - guidelines from the presidential administration weekly addressed to editorial offices, which over time gradually evolved from recommendations into direct orders in recent years (Litvinenko, 2022). Leaks through independent media outlets have provided evidence of the Kremlin issuing instructions to the media ordering and guiding their coverage of domestic and international political development. At the same time, the Russian government maintains control over the most-watched national television channels through explicit state ownership, ownership of enterprise, or control by ruling elites. This control is further secured through appointments of "trusted" individuals to key positions in media management (Toepfl, 2011).

According to Litvinenko (2022), the authoritarian regime[1] creates a seemingly diverse field of narratives that can compete with each other, but the ultimate goal of the distribution of information is to ensure that the audience does not question the regime's legitimacy. This long-established relationship between television and the Kremlin dates back to the early days of Putin's government, seeking to form a powerful top-down authority and align the country's main television channels with this authority (Hutching & Tolz, 2015). This control over television also allows the Kremlin to set the rules for coverage and ban certain frames or terms from appearing on screens. Notable examples of such bans include the exclusion of the word "war" from the coverage of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, by instead referring to it as a "special military operation." This practice is not new to after-Puting Russian television. In 2015, the term "crisis" was indirectly banned from television coverage of economic news, despite the country facing economic hardship. While television covered stories of inflation and financial issues, and even the activities of the "anti-crisis government committee" the situation itself was not described as a "crisis" (Baklanova, 2015, Rozenas & Stukal, 2019).

Following the 2011-2012 mass anti-government protests in Russia and Vladimir Putin's re-election for the third term in 2012, significant changes were made in the state-controlled television broadcasting strategy. Tolz and Teper (2018) note that this has included an increase in political broadcasts, as well as ideological messaging. Television framing, as argued by Lukyanova (2018), has actively been employed by top Russian television channels to legitimise the political power of the country's president. In a comparative study, Lukyanova (2018) found that the frames produced by major television networks, particularly Channel One and Russia-1, contribute to the authority legitimisation and are in parallel with each other on different federal television broadcasts, reinforcing the impact of the frames. The subsequent chapter defines the approach of this thesis to identifying the frames within the broader implication of the theoretical framework for the study.

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[1] The modern-day Russian governance regime lacks a concenus on definition in the academic literature. In recent years, scholars have characterised the Russian regime using terms such as "neo-authoritarianism" (Tolz and Teper, 2018), "secondary or recurring totalitarianism" (Gudkov, 2021), and "hybrid totalitarianism" (Kolesnikov, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

The thesis previously discussed the high level of support for Russia's expansionist policies abroad, as documented both by independent and state-affiliated public opinion monitoring centres. In understanding the process of normalising Russian irredentism through state-controlled television, the research studies its news coverage frames. As numerous social scientists have argued, the *framing* of news can significantly shape and impact the way audiences perceive controversial information (Lecheler & Vreese, 2018). Entman (1993) argued that frames determine whether most people notice a problem, and how they understand it. However, despite the intuitive sense of framing, neither its concept nor the process is clearly defined (Vultee, 2022). This thesis predominantly adheres to Entmna's definition of framing as a tool for understanding "the power of communicating text" through "selection and salience." (Entman, 1993). According to Entman, frames in the news text are the "imprint of the power" registering the identity of the actors and "interest competing to dominate the text." Framing selects certain features of perceived reality and makes them more salient in communicating texts. Frames define the problem and diagnose the causes by recognising the sources of the problem, making moral judgements, predicting their possible outcomes and suggesting remedies. They are constructed by including or excluding certain keywords and stereotypical images in or from the text, providing and backing collections of certain parts of facts and judgements, and highlighting certain information to make it more memorable, recognisable and apparent while omitting other features (Entman, 1993). Additionally, Gitlin (2003) suggested that frames are "principles of selection," while Vultee (2022) described the frames as another word for "definition."

Vultee (2022) summarises media framing as a storytelling structure, allowing audiences to exchange meaningful information by making blocks of political or social life meaningful texts. He argues that framing chooses which moments become "pictures in our heads," and what are the stories they tell. He argues that presenting a discourse in a context that gives them meaning, has a crucial role in the context of securitisation of issues. It is through framing that the elite's claims are presented to the public, allowing them to employ and justify "extraordinary measures" in "emergencies." Additionally, since this thesis examines the state-controlled television broadcast, it is important to recognise that framing applies both to textual and visual information, as these elements merge to reinforce the overall impact (Lukyanova, 2018).

Through systematic monitoring of Channel One's news broadcast, this research examines the prioritisation of news frames to understand their centrality, as compared by Van Gorp (2007). While the study draws a parallel between the growing support of Russia's irredentist or expansionist policies in the studied region, it acknowledges that news coverage frames influence is not the sole factor in shaping public opinion and several significant actors also play key roles. However, the study also recognises that as argued by Vultee (2022), information selection "influences on what agenda of what public and policymakers think about, and can affect attitudes toward attributes of objects." This also brings us to the "the closest theory to framing" — agenda setting (Vultee, 2022). While predominantly focusing on the framing of Channel One's news broadcast, the thesis recognises that framing is only one of the theoretical approaches in the array of media's meaning-making process. Therefore it also considers the agenda-setting role of the news broadcast, especially given the state-controlled nature of Channel One's governance, as an important component of the selective process of packaging and disseminating the news. The research studies the frames in the context of the agenda setting, as defined by Birkland (1997, p. 10), involving "the use of language, stories, metaphors and symbols to advance or retard the movement of issues on the agenda."

Understanding the frames used in the process of normalisation of Russian expansionist policy is essential, as argued by Gitlin (2003) since the media frames make "the world beyond direct experience look natural." In this context, the frames identified by the study are employed to understand the broader normalisation process sought by state-controlled television.

The concept of *normalisation*, as described by Krzyżanowski (2020), is a series of arrangements of either simultaneous or successive discursive strategies that continuously introduce or maintain new patterns of social issues, processes as well as actors into public discourse. This introduction of a "new" normative order is designed not only to change the norms of social conduct but also to gain legitimacy for them. Foucault (2007), a primary source for discussing normalisation, argued that although the norm is central to the concept, as a process normalisation both introduces and obscures norms. Practices of the new norms become simply "normal" and "inevitable," to an extent of "normality" which makes them immune to critical analysis (Taylor, 2009). In his series of lectures at the Collège de France between 1977 and 1978, "Security, Territory, Population" (2007, p. 63) Foucault defined normalisation within the wider framework of security and discipline, particularly disciplinary normalisation, explaining its consistency in an attempt to get people and actions to conform

to certain models. In his reading, normalisation is by using the technique of reducing the most unfavourable "normalities" concerning the "normal" to bring them in line with the general - "normal," and establish an interplay between these various "normalities."

Foucault also argued that the process of normalisation operates in a top-down model and aims to involve or incorporate others into its logic and strategic goals, to introduce and legitimise "social norms" (Krzyżanowski, 2020). He places the norm within the framework of emergence, legitimisation, and power circulation. Foucault assessed "the norm" as an "element" upon which "a certain power is founded and legitimised" (Foucault, 2004). As Tylor (2009) argued, on this ground, while the norm established "the normal," the technique is to "make normal."

Norman Fairclough (2002), one of the founders of critical discourse analysis in sociolinguistics, similarly proposed the idea of *naturalisation,* defined as a process distinguishing between the "dominant" and "dominated" discourse, with a goal for the gradual naturalisation of the dominant discourse (Krzyżanowski, 2020). Krzyżanowski (2020) further argues that among various strategies aimed at normalisation, linguistic resources, along the discursive constitute the normalisation discourse. These strategies, that effectively help to normalise ideologies (the author points out particularly the normalisation of nationalist, racist, as well as/or neoliberal ideologies) include pre-/legitimation, a distinction between us and them, frame-shifting, redefinition, as well as creating moral panic or uncertainty.

Another influential research on the topic by Diane Vaughan (2016, Krzyżanowski, 2020) observes that normalisation is not a process of transforming or maintaining the norms that already exist, but introduces new norms, which formerly were deviant "norms" — not normality — through the process of normalisation that aims at strategically legitimising their previously deviant perception. According to her, the logic of normalisation consists of a successive repetition of social practices and their enactment (Krzyżanowski, 2020).

Gavriely-Nuri in her pivotal approach to normalisation through empirical research studied the normalisation of the process of "unacceptable" notions, for instance, such as war, being presented as acceptable. Focusing her research on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Gavriely-Nuri (2013), argues that normalisation aims to *normalise* the abnormality (in this particular case — of war), and also reduce its "cultural-cognitive dissonance." Normalisation occurs or is being applied not only to wars but a series of other "controversial social issues" like poverty, corruption, and disasters. According to the author, the normalisation takes place through "means of an array of similar discursive strategies." Among those strategies, defined

by Gavriely-Nuri is *euphemisation* — giving a positive appearance or a character to a certain concept, like a war, presenting it as a "special opportunity," another strategy is *naturalisation*. However, her definition of naturalisation is different from the concept proposed by Fairclough and discussed above. In Gavriely-Nury's definition of naturalisation, as a normalisation strategy, the events are being presented as natural, or outcomes of "natural force." Additionally, legitimisation becomes another strategy, intending to portray, for instance, wars as "just, legitimate, worthy of support and as representing a moral act." As will be discussed later, Channel One frequently employed these strategies identified by Gavriely-Nury in its coverage of Russia's irredentist policies. Discussing particularly the normalisation of war, the author also identified *symbolic annihilation* as a key aspect of normalisation discourse. This involves the complete exclusion of the war or some components of the war from the discourse "by omitting or blurring its basic characteristics," such can be the moral, economic, and emotional consequences or damage a war may cause (Gavriely-Nury, 2003). In the process of normalisation, the importance of "frame shifts" (Goffman, 1974) has been discussed by Krzyżanowski and Ledin (2017), studying the normalisation of radical and "uncivilised" in both online and offline public spheres. They argue that frame shifts assist writes or speakers to normalise previously or otherwise "unacceptable" rhetoric (in this context: discriminatory or xenophobic) while using argumentation frames that are "acceptable," such as public safety and security.

As this research studies the means used by the state-controlled Channel One to normalise policies, in the framework of this thesis, normalisation is defined as a strategy of Channel One to introduce norms and legitimise existing ones, reinforcing their "normalness." Normalisation is seen as a process which aims at converting social discourse norms previously generally, regarded as "unacceptable" into "right" practices and presenting them as an inevitable outcome, a new and unquestionable reality. Above mentioned particular strategies of normalisation, such as strategies of normalisation, *naturalisation, euphemisation and symbolic annihilation* are employed in the data analysis of this thesis. Throughout the research, the mechanism defined to normalise the phenomenon of Russian irredentism the thesis draws from selectively or partially applied normalisation techniques, that were in certain cases applied to assess the other normalisation efforts, for instance, the banishment of brutality, which although was not used as a mechanism for the television in general, it was put in particular use when covering military conflicts involving Russian troops.

In studying normalisation, the study acknowledges and draws attention to the variations of the term *normalisation*, and its application in different historic contexts of

governance, including the "post-crisis" normalisation in Central-Eastern European "satellite states" of the Soviet Union as an attempt to restore the communist "Soviet-type soci-political system" (Brus et al., 1982; Skilling, 1984). Although an approach to analysing the media *normalisation* techniques, while discussing the authoritative speeches, particularly in regard to them being presented as having "everything under control," might resemble the media's attempt to portray state authorities as effective managers (Rozenas & Stukal, 2019), the research aims exclusively to understanding the implication of the normalisation within its media representation framework.

Methodology

This thesis employs qualitative analysis to investigate the means used by Russian state-controlled television to normalise and justify the country's irredentist policies and imperialist aspirations towards selected nations in the country's southwest. Specifically, the research focuses on state-controlled Channel One's prime-time news programme to examine these techniques and answer the research question:

How does the Russian state-controlled Channel One seek normalisation for the country's irredentist policies in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus through news journalism following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine?

Channel One (before 2002: Russian Public Television, ORT) is an all-Russian mandatory public access television channel and is among the most-watched television channels in the country. Additionally, as an "external-facing" channel, it plays a crucial role in providing information to Russian-speaking communities globally. This gives significant importance to Channel One's broadcast, requiring a furter responsibility for the coverage of sensitive topics. (Hutching & Tolz, 2015; Channel One official website, n.d.). Before the March 2022 suspension, Channel One was a European Broadcast Union member. Besides Channel One's unique outreach and position as a successor of the First Channel of Central Television of the USSR, the selection of the channel has been also influenced by its ownership condition. Unlike the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK), entirely owned by the state, the Channel One ownership holders include the state, other institutions and private companies, although the state holds the biggest single share (Zlobin, 2021). This partial commercial ownership, as argued by Hutching and Tolz (2015), requires the channel to take into account the commercial viability, as it also relies on advertisement revenues. Consequently, the political messages delivered by Channel One are delivered in a "polished manner," which also means that the channels broadcasting propaganda function require solidification with its audience (Hutching and Tolz, 2015). Beyond the reinforcement with the audience, as a non-entirely state-owned television, it supposedly requires a broader consensus in framing sensitive issues, making it a reason to focus on the channel for this thesis. Furthermore, assuming that unlike talk shows or analytical programs, news reporting has a relatively low degree of being opinionated and is

more likely to present conventional news stories with a "just-the-facts" approach (Colombia Journalism Review, 2017), the research focused on the news journalism practices of the Channel One. This focus allowed an understanding of the channel's direct and exclusively journalistic involvement in the normalisation of the state's irredentist policies.

Systematic monitoring of the channel's prime-time news program identified the key irredentism- and imperialism-related frames. Exemplary broadcasts from each of the four chosen time periods were selected for further comprehensive analysis within the context of general patterns and normalisation processes applied by television. Under the umbrella of the categorised themes, the research combined the main frames the channel used for its irredentism or expansionism-related coverage. To categorise and interpret the grouped frames into themes, a theory-driven thematic analysis was employed, focusing on dominant frames utilised by the channel. Details of the data collection specifics are described in the next chapter. The primary data was reviewed and analysed using the thematic analysis model suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis identifies, analyses and reports patterns within the collected data, revealing the "repeated patterns of meaning" (Braun and Clarke, 2006), which allows the researcher also to interpret the key aspects of the researched topic and address the research question (Boyatzis, 1998).

The key themes were identified based on the judgement of their prevalence and frequency, the centrality in the news broadcast, and importantly, their connection to the research question. The thematic analysis was primarily focused on the semantic approach, extracting themes based on their explicit or "surface meaning" of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). However, given the multimodal nature of television broadcasts, the thematic analysis also applied to key visual aspects, which helped the research to theorise the social-cultural context of the themes applied by the channel's correspondents and newsmakers.

The research adhered to Braun and Clarke's method of six-phase thematic analysis, in certain cases not necessarily as a linear process. Initially, the research, familiarised itself with the data, by starting systematic monitoring of the partial data time frame. The selected time frame was divided into four periods. The first period of the selected data (from February 15, 2022, to March 15, 2022(1)) was monitored first, followed by the exact same period of broadcast one year later (February 15, 2023, to March 15, 2023(3)), alongside relevant literature engagement. This allowed the research to identify the main frames at the start period of the research time frame and their development over a year (1 and 3), and to compare the commemorative approach to significant events of the period. Monitoring of the remaining periods was conducted later to provide a comprehensive view of the data and its

interpretation. This process of monitoring was accompanied by informal coding of major frames, visual applications and significant trends in Channel One's coverage of the state's irredentist policies relevant to the study region, contributing to the formal coding of the collected data later. In this phase, the collected relevant data was transcribed for thematic analysis, with attention to the visual representation of the text when necessary.

Based on the most common patterns and frame prevalence, the research identified exemplary news programmes from each period of the monitoring period, for a more detailed analysis. This phase of research involved generating initial formal codes and themes for the selected data, in the context of the entire collected data, hence the specific data was organised into meaningful groups. Data collection and coding were followed by a search and identification of themes based on their significance. Selected themes were then refined and reviewed or where necessary the themes were separated or grouped and categorised, based on their relevance to the research question and their applicability. The process was followed with the analysis and writing.

Ultimately, to answer the research question on how state-controlled television normalises the notion in question, thematic analysis was used to group and interpret the mechanisms and techniques employed by Channel One in their news broadcast. These themes and techniques are discussed in the later chapters of this thesis analysing the main findings.

Data Collection

Following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Channel One's editorial policy underwent notable changes. Various programs, including entertainment, were removed to make more room for political content and documentaries. These changes in the broadcast agenda changes also affected the airtime of the channel's prime-time news program, making it longer (Pasti, 2024). To track the changes in framing and normalisation techniques, data collection for this thesis started for a period of two weeks before the invasion. To further examine the general trends and patterns, and to understand the frames in different contexts over time throughout, various periods were selected — consistent in their length and distribution.

To analyse the methods applied to normalise the concept in question, the study monitored four months of prime-time news broadcast on Channel One, distributed over two yeast periods starting from the winter of 2022. Two months were selected for each year, with their utmost relevance to the developments in the region. The news broadcast was monitored from the date of February 15, 2022, days before Russia invaded Ukraine, to detect the early tactics to normalise the expansionist policies, to March 15 2022 (1). The same period was monitored a year later, from February 15, 2023, to March 15 2023 (3). This approach allowed the research to test possible changes in frame production, as well as study the commemorative presentation of the events. Following, a six-month gap, prime-time news coverage was monitored from 15 September 2022 and 15 October 2022 (2). This period covered the Russia-organised referendums in eastern Ukraine on the annexation of the regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhia. The monitoring period 1 also coincided with mounting tension over Moldova's breakaway region of Transnistria and mass anti-government protests in Georgia. Similarly to period 2, the same period was monitored a year later — from 15 September 2023 to 15 October 2023 (4), and coincided with the flare-up of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, allowing the research to study the approach of Channel One's coverage of the South Caucasus.

During the selected periods, the complete television broadcasts of the 21:00 news programme "Vremya" were monitored. Over the examined period, the news programmes varied from 32 minutes to 2 hours 20 minutes, averaging 1 hour on weekdays, and 2 hours 5 minutes for the Sunday edition, which summarises the most important events of the week. Approximately 120 hours of news broadcasts were monitored for research purposes. This

data was informally coded to identify the general patterns of normalisation. The programmes were monitored from the opening to closing, regardless of the possible relevance of the aired report to the research, to detect every relevance to the research topic. This comprehensive monitoring allowed the thesis to understand the structure of the prime-time news program, its approach to agenda-setting, and topic prioritisation, as well as to observe the techniques in which the news distribution is organised, distributed and introduced. The broadcast was accessed from the official website of the News of Channel One (www.1tv.ru/news), which archives and stores its all news programmes and is publicly available, with certain territorial restrictions outside Russia.

Following the monitoring, four programs — one from each research period were selected to be further thematically analysed. These programs were chosen based on their relevance to the research question and significance in framing the counter's irredentist policies. The length of the selected programs varies between 35 minutes the shortest and 2 hours 22 minutes the longest and represent news from different days of the week: 27 February 2022; 30 September 2022, Friday; 26 February 2023; 30 September 2023. While these four programs exemplify the collected data, the thesis is not confined to them alone. During the monitoring, the representations of ideas relevant to the research question were translated from Russian into English and registered, organised by the date of their broadcast and time codes. The topics were then analysed, to identify the strategies employed by the state-controlled television channel to normalise the state's expansionist policies. Coding was conducted manually, and the extract of identified frames and themes is attached to this thesis as *Appendix 1*.

Frames

This chapter presents the thesis's findings on irredentism-related frames identified in Channel One's news coverage. The dominant frames employed by the television are categorised into main groups based on their relevance to the research. These theme frames are investigated in the three subchapters summarising the news frames from a (post)imperial perspective, portraying Russia as a great power in danger, and emphasising the dichotomy of "us" versus "them" — with varying interpretations of both "us" and "them." Furthermore, the chapter explores the external framing of the "other," particularly the West. These themes lay the groundwork for the techniques of normalisation, discussed in the subsequent section.

"We" and "Our"

"With Russia forever" — a Channel One-illustrated poster displayed behind the news programme's host during the September 30, 2022, broadcast, features a vote sign, as the host announces a meeting-concert in the Kremlin celebrating the official annexation of four eastern Ukrainian regions. In a dramatic shift in tone, in her opening text, the host proclaims that "Russia does not only opens its doors to the new regions, to its brothers and sisters who live there. Russia opens its heart to them," attributing the sentiment to Vladimir Putin. The reportage, titled "Back in Place" ("На круги своя"), carried a subheadline: "They have returned home."

Channel One's news broadcast typically pairs each news piece with a headline and a sub-headline that summarises the report, often employing catchy phrases or cultural, social or political references. For example, a report about a Channel One-produced film partially filmed in space is titled "The Space (is) ours!" (Космос наш!), allegedly echoing the phrase "Crimea (is) ours!" (Крым наш!), a pro-government neologism and viral meme adopted as a patriotic symbol during the annexation of Crimea (Suslov, 2014), clinically extending the concept of irredentism to space (12 March 2023, Channel One). The notion of *"our(s)"* — creating a sense of common identity, belonging and responsibility, frequently recurs, and is regularly observed in the framing of the research-relevant coverage normalising irredentism.

These headlines and subheadlines also often encapsulate the frames of the reports. In the context of the research question, they typically convey frames of unanimity, similarity,

and a shared destiny between the people of Russia and Ukraine's annexed regions, as well as other irredentism-affected regions. Examples include "Our People: Be Like at Home," "Our Children" (September 16, 2022), "Our People" (October 2, 2022 and March 13, 2023), "We Do Not Abandon Our People" (15, October 2022), all references to the population of eastern Ukrainian regions. These pronouns also contribute to or create nationalist rhetoric that distinguishes "us" from "them," and separates "our" (Russian) world from "theirs" (Billig, 2010), accompanied by the frames of public support and endorsement for "our," including state's expansionist policies. In this course, Channel One employs authoritative quotes and popular sentiment to frame Russia as a "home," to which the people of the annexed regions returned, in some cases as a reward for long anticipation and sacrifices. For instance, the reportage from September 26, 2022, covering the Russia-organised referendum in the occupied regions was titled "To Home" with a sub-headline "Historic Choice," portraying the referendum process as a "return" to "our mother Russia." The following day, a similar report covering the updates on the referendum was titled "We Are Russia", with the sub-headline "Choice is made." The subsequent report was titled "To Homeland."

The notion of "home" and "homeland," and the idea of "returning" to it, has been a central frame in the coverage of the annexation of the eastern Ukrainian regions, as well as other territorial claims in post-Soviet space. This narrative is pivotal in supporting Russian irredentism and the concept of the "Russian World," suggesting that some formerly Soviet territories were artificially separated from their "heartland" (Laruelle, 2020; Zavershinskaia, 2024).

"Return to the home of millions of people who regard Russia as their homeland (*rodina)...*" states the host of the news programme in an opening scene from the September 30, 2022, broadcast, referring to the annexation of eastern Ukrainian regions.

The concept of *rodina*, for which "homeland" is a rough translation, lacks an exact equivalent in English, or any other European language, with possibly the closest approximation being the German *Heimat* (Thompson, 2000). *Rodina* designates a place of birth or, as described by Thompson (2000), entails an allegiance surpassing other allegiances. In the news broadcast, *rodina* is regularly used interchangeably in the news text with "motherland" and "fatherland," both through authoritative quotes and the channel's crew, particularly in the introductory texts by the programme hosts (e.g., October 1, 2022; October 5, 2022). It also appears in headlines and subheadlines, such as the reportage from September

27, 2022, covering the referendum in Eastern Ukrainian regions is titled "To *Rodina*" (На родину), while the headline for the quotes above opening reportage covering the annexation is "We - Russia," reflecting also territoriality. As argued by Starovoitova (Thompson, 2020), the Russian national identity is closely related to its territoriality, as "all conquered land is soon redesigned as Russia."

In a joint reportage where the channel assigned its correspondents the celebratory events in all newly annexed regions to cover, the Channel One correspondent in a report about "the special day in *Russian* Melitopol," (September 30, 2022, Channel One) announces: "This is an event that I can perhaps compare only with March 2014, when Crimea and Sevastopol returned to their native harbour. Almost a similar atmosphere is here - in Zaphorozsky (Ukr: Zaporizhia) region." Later in the same report the same correspondent in a selfie-style video from the crowd, excitedly describes "the impossible to transfer atmosphere." This celebration of "homecoming" is further reinforced through interviews framed from the perspective of familiar relations, extending beyond "brotherhood" and "sisterhood" to portray Russia as a "mother." Short quotes from ordinary citizens announcing that "we return to our mother," and "Russia is our mother" (September 26, 2022, Channel One) are regularly used to emphasise this theme. This narrative is often accompanied by the heroic frame of the "Russia does not abandon its people." In an opening report from Ulan Ude, a city in eastern Siberia where Vladimir Putin visited a military aviation manufacturing facility, the state president addressed a small group of factory employees, highlighting the importance of the people's contribution to the "special military operation." In a reportage covering the visit, where Channel One possibly got exclusive access, with only two camerapersons present there, the channel quotes the president: "For us firstly this is a fight for our people who live in these territories (Donbas). We are a multinational country, but nevertheless, it is the "Russian World" (Russkiy Mir). If you communicate with people who came from there — I met them — they are no different from us, no difference. They are like us, they are a part of us, a part of our nation. How can we abandon them?"

In parallel and through the group identification this frame was employed within the broader theme of presenting Russia's expansionism as motivated by its desire of "helping to save ours (our people), therefore "right" (September 21, 2022, Channel One). This frames of "altruism" and "rightness" are particularly relevant in the coverage of the mobilisation of draftees in Russia, often accompanied by the "we are one nation" frame (September 25, 2022). Additionally, the continuity of the imperial legacy is evident, as the news broadcast quoted in the report Donbas residents claiming that they were "born in Russia," referring to

the Soviet Union, and are now returning to Russia (the present-day state). This frame of "one nation" and "one family" is also presented in the context of the broader frame theme of communal backing for the state's expansionist actions, as "moral actors" versus differently defined "them."

Image 1: "A battle for great, historic Russia. The reasons for the hybrid war that is carried against us by the collective West," the news programme host announces a reportage titled "We - Russia!" (September 30, 2023, Vremya)

The "Other"

"Ultimately, it was a question of life and death for our country, a question of our historic future as a nation. This is not an exaggeration, it is just like that. It was a real danger not only to our interests but to the existence of our statehood, and its sovereignty. It was the red line I repeatedly talked about and they (the West) crossed it," on the day of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Channel One covering Vladimir Putin's address to the nation highlighted the "inevitability" of the invasion (February 24, 2022, Channel One). Throughout the week, parts of this speech, including the mentioned one, were featured repeatedly, framing Ukraine's western ambitions as "inevitable threat" to the Russian state. The frame of **securitisation** is among the most regularly employed frames by Channel One's news

coverage. Securitisation involves identifying the critical threats to the nation and taking urgent matters to protect the country from these threats (Olmastroni, 2014). And in this course, the invasion of Ukraine is also being portrayed as a "national security" issue (March 1, 2022, Channel One).

In this process of securitisation, defining the **"us" and "them,"** and "othering" is a key component of both the framing and the normalisation process. Extensive literature in (post)colonial studies of the West and Russia identities being mutually shaped by **"othering"** each other (e.g., Melegh 2006; Morozov, 2015; Neumann, 1999), and this thesis touches upon the topic only to the extent applicable for investigating the normalisation of the irredentist frames, as in his "Russia's post-colonial identity," Morozov (2015, p. 113) argued about the possibility that driven by its "imperialist Self" Russia is likely to continue defining itself through the othering of the West and while attempting to reclaim control over "breakaway parts of the former Empire." This combination of frames overall aligns with the Kremlin propaganda's approach, which simultaneously presents Russia as **victimised** by the West and entitled to dominance in the territories of the former Soviet Union (Kassymbekova & Marat, 2022). Within this context of the perceived threat, the propagated confrontation with the West is framed from the perspective of "othering" Russia from the "collective West" adding another dimension to the "us" and "them," setting a prime example of positive self-representation and negative othering.

*Image 2: "**Others** on the Dniester": The headline of a report about hypothetical "West-orchestrated Ukrainian anti-Russian provocation" in Transnistria (March 12, 2023, Vremya)*

This *othering* is also evident when in the near-total absence of domestic coverage, Channel One extensively covers the domestic developments both in the neighbouring countries and especially in Western and Central European countries, framing them from the perspective of moral and economic decline, poverty and chaos. There is regular coverage of domestic unrest or disagreements with governments in European countries, often framed as consequences of the energy crisis due to the closure of the European market for the Rissian gas following February 2022. Beyond the economic hardship, this crisis portrayed is also "moral," where the "European reality" is portrayed as a declining civilisation (e.g., February 5, 2023, Channel One). This critical representation of the West stands in sharp contrast to the positive and constructive portrayal of East Asian countries, particularly China. While this segment goes beyond the scope of this thesis, these frames of "othering" and the "chaos" everywhere else play an important role between the lines of the irredentism-related normalisation process, where Russia is framed as a rational actor of having any given situation **under control** while being in "**self-defence**."

Either Empire — or nothing

"Russia's fate is either to collapse or to be an empire — called by different names in different times," the Russian Soviet-born writer, Alexandr Prohkanov was quoted by Channel One in a celebratory reportage about his birthday aired by the news programme (Prokhanov, Channel One, February 26, 2023). Prokhanov is renowned for his influential role in promoting Russian "imperial patriotism" (Griffiths, 2023), and advocates for the future "Fifth Empire" of Russia (Mondry and Pavlov, 2020). Channel One's selection of prominent individuals, most often celebrated for their service to the state and whose birthdays or commemoration days are featured in the channel's news programme, appears to be highly selective. These reports, typically concluding the daily program agenda, frequently feature well-established Soviet and contemporary actors and singers. In addition to cultural figures, these reports also feature figures with significant contributions to science, medicine, or military technology, in recognition for their inventions and achievements. However, these appearances often extend beyond mere cultural or scientific focus, incorporating direct or

indirect political messaging, with Prokhanov's birthday reportage serving as a prime example.

In a report broadcasted on February 26, 2023, which featured an interview with him and a home visit by the Channel One correspondent, Prokhanov's background is portrayed alongside his vision for Russia's past, present and future. Introduced by his friends and the correspondent as "the last soldier of empire," Prokhanov in the interview discusses the ongoing political situation and Russia's war in Ukraine, describing the Russian people as a "god-chosen" nation. This reportage, at first sight, intended to be a celebratory event, extends however beyond that combining a group of key frames utilised by Channel One in its coverage of state's foreign policies. The report repeatedly emphasises Prokhanov's views on the Russian Empire, arguing that **maintaining the empire has no alternative** for defending the Russian people. This **"last resort"** framing of Russia's expansionist policies is a recurrent theme frequently used by the channel, portraying the Russian state invasion of its neighbours as unavoidable action — "only choice," "no other option left." (February 26, 2023; October 2, 2022). The portrayal of the Russian invasion of Ukraine as "inevitable" is one of the mechanisms used to normalise the idea of using hard power in the irredentist context, a topic that will be further discussed in the chapter on normalisation techniques utilised by Channel One. "We have no chance to lose (the war), we are forced to win, and go there (to Ukraine), *with tears and blood,*" concludes Prokhanov in his interview as the Channel One correspondent apologies for his "apparently not carefully formulated question" regarding Russia's chances of winning the "existential fight against the West" (Pavel Pchyolkin, February 26, 2023, Channel One).

The report frequently references Russia's imperial and (including) Soviet past, and the Soviet army's capacities and draws a connection between the "glorious past" of the nation and the aftermath of the Soviet Union collapse. It claims that with the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia transitioned from a state to a "non-state." In this context, Russia's war on Ukraine is described as a "Russian counter-strike," within a frame of Russian **historical justice**, complimenting the regularly asserted notion of Russia's "inviolable sovereignty," while simultaneously disregarding the sovereignty of other neighbouring nations.

"... Moreover, granting the republics (members of the Soviet Union) with the right to leave the state (USSR) without any conditions… some kind of madness," Channel One quoted Vladimir Putin reflecting on mistakes of the Soviet leadership in a reportage about modern-day Ukraine being "entirely created by Russia." The reportage interviewed history experts confirming Putin's description of historical developments (February 27, 2022,

Channel One), becoming another example of frame themes **delegitimising the identity of selected nations**. The glorification or romanticising of the country's Soviet past within the imperial context, through indirect messaging, was repeatedly observed during the monitoring period. For example, in an October 15, 2022, programme about an art exhibition, an expert source described the 1980s of the Soviet Union as "the fairytale period for our country," fitting Morozov's (2015) definition of contemporary Russia's identity, which is heavily dependant on its (post-)imperial self-image as a great power, and "where the greatness is still defined by referring to the Soviet past" (Morozov, 2015). This also aligns with Oushakin's argument, that the post-Soviet postcoloniality, instead of overcoming contemporary colonial experiences, searches "for a *better* empire in the past" (Oushakine, 2011; Gerasimov et al., 2013). This glorious representation of the Soviet Union is also frequently framed visually. In another report from 30 September 2022, covering the ceremony in which Putin signed a decree incorporating Ukraine's four annexed regions into Russia, the journalist references Russia's imperial background through quotes from the president by invoking the term "Novorossiya" in reference to south-eastern regions of Ukraine. "Novorossiya" has the literal meaning of "New Russia" as a name dating back to time of the Catherine II, but re-emerged in the early 1990s and re-emerged in 2014 in the process of endorsing the Crimea annexation, and among other paradigms, inspired by Tsarist nostalgia (Laruelle, 2019). The report recalls that the region had been contested by imperial figures such as Catherine II, Empress of Russia, and empire-time nobleman Grigory Potemkin. In the same report, Vladimir Putin is quoted as saying: "We will defend our land by all available strength and means and will do everything to secure the lives of our people. This is the great *liberating mission* of our nation" (Putin, Channel One, 2022).

This, at first glance defensive nationalism, characterised by communities as perceived as being at risk, either because of their small size or an existing threat from their expansionist neighbours (Thompson, 2000), takes a dual meaning in this quote and similar Kremlin narratives by contradicting it to the expansive nationalism, which looks outwards, as described by Thompson (2000), "unaware of its colonial desire." This approach of **emphasising Russia's "greatness"** while portraying it as "threatened" has been a persistent frame in Channel One's news broadcast, to justify the "expansive nationalism" through "defensive nationalism," often accompanied by a narrative of imperial **"liberating mission**."

Image 3: Channel One correspondent Vitaliy Kadchenko reporting from Melitopol, opens the report with a Soviet star image inscribed "USSR - victory," and the black and orange St. George ribbon, perceived as a reflection of Russia's imperial identity (Marandici, 2023), also featured separately. The headline of the report reads "To be with Russia: United country" (February 21, 2023, Vremya)

The "messianic" portrayal of Russia, consistently observed in the news coverage beyond the annexation of the Ukrainian regions, presents **Russia as the "only" power** capable of certain actions or achievements. Frames such as "the only way to save them (the people of Donbas) was joining Russia," "only Moscow is capable of stopping bloodshed" (in Nagorno-Karabakh) (September 20, 2023, Channel One), "Russia is the guarantor of stability in the (Transnistrian) region," (February 24, 2023, Channel One) reinforce this messianic role for Russia, which as argued by Sargamoso (2020), within the context of the "Russian World," has became a guiding foundation for Russian foreign policy, positioning Moscow as a global leader of the "conservative" world. This portrayal of "the new world order" has been a recurring frame in the Channel One coverage, and partially aligns with the journalistic portrayal and definition of a new emerging "reality" within a normalisation process.

Normalisation techniques

In their normalisation effort, the journalists and editorial team of the news programme "Vremya" employed a set of professional and personal strategies contributing to the process through various forms of "normalities." These efforts are a combination of the use of linguistic strategies, manipulating the power of language, the visual frames accompanying the journalistic text, as well as the direct involvement of journalists within this process. In this chapter, the thesis critically examines these principal techniques utilised by Channel One's news coverage to facilitate the normalisation of the state's irredentist policies, within the wider context of imperialist assertion, and in constructing a sense of "realness" and "truth."

A *new*, *normal* and shared reality

On the day of the formal annexation of the four Ukrainian regions and their incorporation into Russia, Channel One provided extensive coverage of the grand concert in Moscow celebrating the annexation. Among the official and unofficial interviewees, the journalist covering the concert also interviewed his colleague Iryna Kuksenkova, a military correspondent for Channel One who had covered the war in Donbas, and on that day was participating in the concert. Wrapped in the Russian flag and surrounded by the concert crowd, Kuksenkova declares loudly into the microphone:

"Today is undoubtedly historic. Today Russia became bigger — legitimately. It is ours. We returned what belongs to us" (Channel One, September 30, 2022).

The channel's news correspondents frequently and openly express their stance on the conflict in their news coverage, but before we discuss the normalisation strategy through personalising the news later in this chapter, this example highlights the media's own support for the annexation of Ukrian's regions and more broadly the Russian war on Ukriaine. This approach takes the messaging of the news broadcast beyond this banal nationalism and posits the media as an active agent of support, portraying it as a part of broader society that endorses the state's and or the president's actions. Kuksenkova's use of the generalised "we" frames

the annexation as a collective achievement and responsibility for "returning" what "belonged to *us*," what is "*ours*" – aligning with the broader themes of irredentism, by claiming that Russia's expansionism is "legitimate." Yet, this journalistic expression is but one element in creating a picture of widespread support for expansionism and collective reality.

As previously discussed, television plays a key influence on the formation of public opinion in Russia (Lipman, 2009). Rather than examining the extent to which Channel One coverage specifically influences public opinion on certain issues, this analysis focuses on how the channel utilises the public opinion polls to normalise the state's irredentist or expansionist policies by depicting or altering social reality. In this context, social *reality* is defined as a concept at the level of social systems and understood as a measure of agreement or consensus within the members of that system, or, in other words, a perception of the reality that is commonly shared within a society, a "normative sharing of "oughtness"" (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; McLeod & Chaffee, 1972, pp. 51-52). Through its broadcast, the news coverage of Channel One frequently presents public opinion polls on sensitive issues related to the annexation of Ukraine's territories, particularly regarding the "special military operation," referendums in the annexed regions and other matters of significant public interest. Public opinion is shared by Channel One besides the "base rate" news coverage of public opinion polls or statistics, also through exemplification (the term is borrowed from Daschmann, 2000) in the form of personal examples from statistical categories.
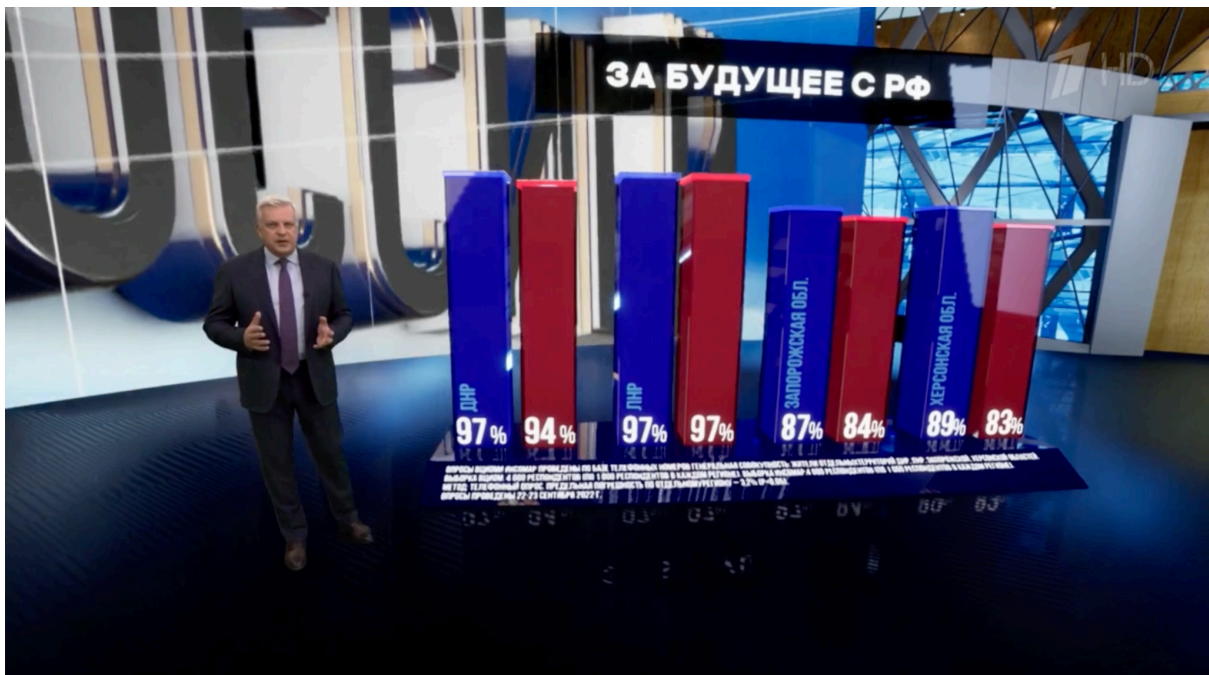

Image 4: "For future with the Russian Federation," infographics on public opinion and support on referendums in eastern Ukrainian four regions (September 25, 2022, Vremya)

The portrayal of general public support is farmed through a wide geographic range of agents – from the local population in Ukraine's eastern regions to the Russian domestic population spread across different regions, to out-community participants such as foreigners, particularly elites. Information regarding public opinion polls on Donbas's willingness to join Russia is always presented through special infographics with the use of graphic design special effects, making the numbers and information more memorable and impressive (for example 20; 22; 23 September 2022). Besides the visualisation of statistics, the news broadcast attached to vox-pops and opinions confirming the validity of the presented number and support of the locals for unification with Russia. To highlight the geographical diversity of the public support for an issue in favour, in certain cases, Channel One utilises the wide geography of its correspondents' network by conducting vox-pops across different parts of Russia, such as in the case of September 21, 2022 broadcast, to frame the public support for Vladimir Putin's decision to annex Ukraine's four regions, vox-pops were conducted in Kaliningrad, Novosibirsk and Ulyanovsk — cities that are each 2000 kilometres apart.

This normalisation process, additionally, employed *validation* through the channel's framing, elevating the public support to the global, transnational level and by disseminating validating voices of foreign citizens, often foreign journalists expressing their direct or indirect support for Russia's irredentist politics. The framing of foreign support for the Russian cause is articulated both at high diplomatic levels, as seen from heads of state (e.g., Alexander Lukashenko, 14 October 2022; Bashar al-Assad, 15 March 2023, Channel One), as well as through non-authoritative sources, such as a Serbian participant of a "Russian World" conference, who is quoted by the channel claiming that "Today Russia saves the civilisation" — as a reference to the war on Ukraine (14 March 2023, Channel One). Wider foreign support is notably exemplified by the pro-peace protests in Germany (5 March 2023, Channel One), which are framed from the perspective supporting the Russian stance on the conflict. This collective consolidation and validation of the state actions is further portrayed through interviews with representatives of the Russian non-ruling parties, that otherwise usually are not featured in the news broadcast.

In this search for the **international validation** process, an important role is given particularly to foreign, specifically Western journalists. American and European journalists, critical of their governments, in the context of geopolitical relations, are highlighted as proof of Russia's "rightness." Such profiles of journalists include the American journalist Tucker Carlson, who later became the first Western journalist granted an opportunity to interview Vladimir Putin, and Seymour Hersh (e.g., October 7, 2022; February 18, 2023; March 1,

2023). In the context of these depicted shared and collectively supported reality, where all segments of the society are included: ordinary citizens, intellectual elites and celebrities, athletes, politicians and state authorities, an important role is given in the representation of Channel One's own support, extending to personal — **journalistic support**, through its key correspondents and media workers, especially those embedded correspondents assigned to cover the war from the conflict zone. This support, as already outlined at the beginning of this chapter through the example of the correspondent Kuksenkova, besides the indirect editorial policy means, has also been displayed publicly, as a part of news coverage.

The patriotic appearance of Kuksenkova, covered in a Russian flag and assuring the audience that "we surely will win" (30 September 2022, Channel One), is not the only time the military correspondent appeared in the news coverage of the Channel she represents - with direct political support. In another broadcast of the news program, she appeared wearing a National Front T-shirt which reads "Team Putin."
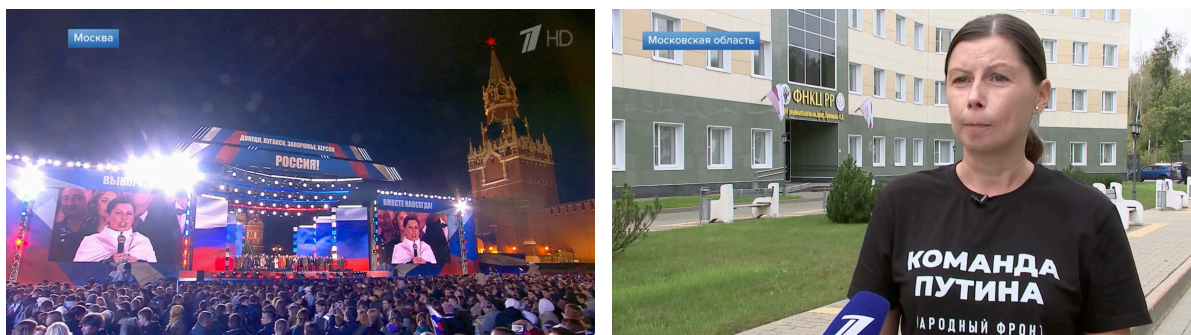
Image 5, on the left: Channel One correspondent Iryna Kuksenkova expresses her support for the annexation of Ukraine's four regions at a concert in Moscow celebrating the event (September 30, 2023, Vremya).
Image 6, on the right: Kuksenkova is interviewed about assistance to "SMO" veterans, wearing a T-shirt that reads "Team Putin, National Front" (September 15, 2023, Vremya).

The National Front is an initiative established by Russian President Vladimir Putin, and since the war in Ukraine also mobilises public assistance and support for the "SVO" participants. Through the journalists of Channel One, this organisation has been endorsed regularly - including both through reportages about their charity activities of the organisation and through direct calls to support them. The direct calls for actions of support, mostly communicated throughout the news programme hosts, but also through journalists, regularly featured QR codes for the Front's "Everything for the victory" programme on the television screen calling the audience for donations (e.g., 20 September, 2022; 2 October, 2022; 15 February, 2023, Channel One).

Beyond the endorsement of the military operation in the context of irredentist claims, the **editorial support** for the state's expansionist policy is also displayed directly and indirectly through visuals, expressed especially through symbols attached to clothing, and more particularly observed through the correspondents covering the Russian invasion of Ukraine from the frontline, and their endorsement of Russia's war symbols, such are the letters "Z" and "V," associated with neo-imperial aspirations and although turned into official symbols meant to mobilise public support, originated and were inspired from ultranationalist online communities (Marandici, 2023). For instance, in many of the reportages where the embedded correspondent Anna Prokofeva, is seen wearing a military uniform and the double letter "Z" — a correspondence to the war propaganda campaign of "Za Pobedu" - "For victory" (Marandici, 2023). The correspondent's support extends beyond the symbolic gestures and in her Telegram Channel name which translates as "Journalist Z" (Zhurnalistka | Z |) the journalists post not only updates from the war zone, but also her personal life blog of friendship with soldiers, and physical assistance to the war volunteering effort.

Image 7: Dressed in a military uniform, indistinguishable from combat forces, Channel One correspondent Anna Prokofieva reports from Zaporizhzhia/Zaporozhye (October 3, 2023, Vremya)

In this context, the embedded correspondents not only covered the "special military operation" but themselves created media events, becoming a part of it, by for instance bringing letters of support written by schoolchildren for the soldiers. It is important to note, that the journalists of Channel One often being featured obtaining information from isolated

environments, in the absence of press conferences and public events organised to respond to interest in public issues, and Channel One journalists are given exclusive access to both governmental and military sources, providing them with them a privileged and "exclusive" role in reporting.
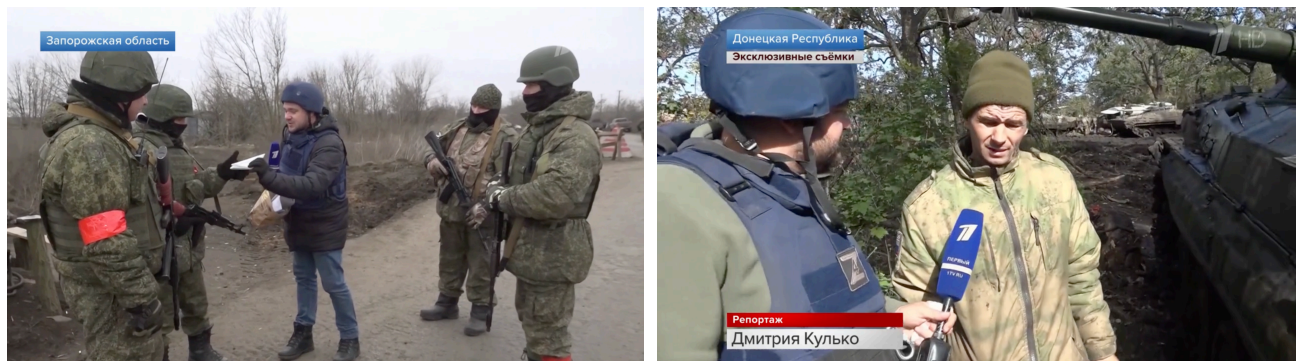

Image 8, on the left: Channel One correspondent Vitaliy Kadchenko delivers children's letters he brought to the frontline for the soldiers (February 26, 2023, Vremya)
Image 9, on the right: Channel One reporter Dmitry Kulko wears a safety west with the war symbol "Z" on it. The location tag reads "Donetsk Republic," and the note below: "Exclusive footage." (October 09, 2022, Vremya)

This approach and **portrayal of the commonly shared and supported "new reality,"** through its repetitive structure, naturalises the discourse and its goals so that the audience perceives the situation they encounter as "the way it is" (Fairclough, 2002, Reyes, 2011), which is supported by "everyone," as those who might be opposing it are never represented. In this context of the "shared reality" that the broadcast language repeatedly employs the "us" and them" rhetoric, where journalists of Channel One clearly positioned and labelled themselves as a part of the "*we*" — including Channel One's media personnel, are presented through "positive self-representation," as brave, powerful, moral, and "other's negative-representation" (terms borrowed from Reisigl and Wodak, 2001), where the other (depending on the context and the particular nation) is immoral, weak, in need for help and civilisation. As argued by Reyes (2011), this serves as a means for the legitimisation of actions through emotions, particularly the emotion of fear, where the speaker and the audience are in one **"us" team, and the "negatively constructed" social actors correspond to "them" group,** narrowing down the "reality" to what the Channel One selects to portray.

Furthermore, this "new reality" was reinforced through the representation of Channel One's maps, which included the occupied regions of Ukraine and Crimea within Russia's official geographic boundaries. Six days after the official annexation of Ukraine's eastern

regions, Channel One incorporated the major towns of these regions into its weather broadcast and featured them daily alongside Russian cities since then.
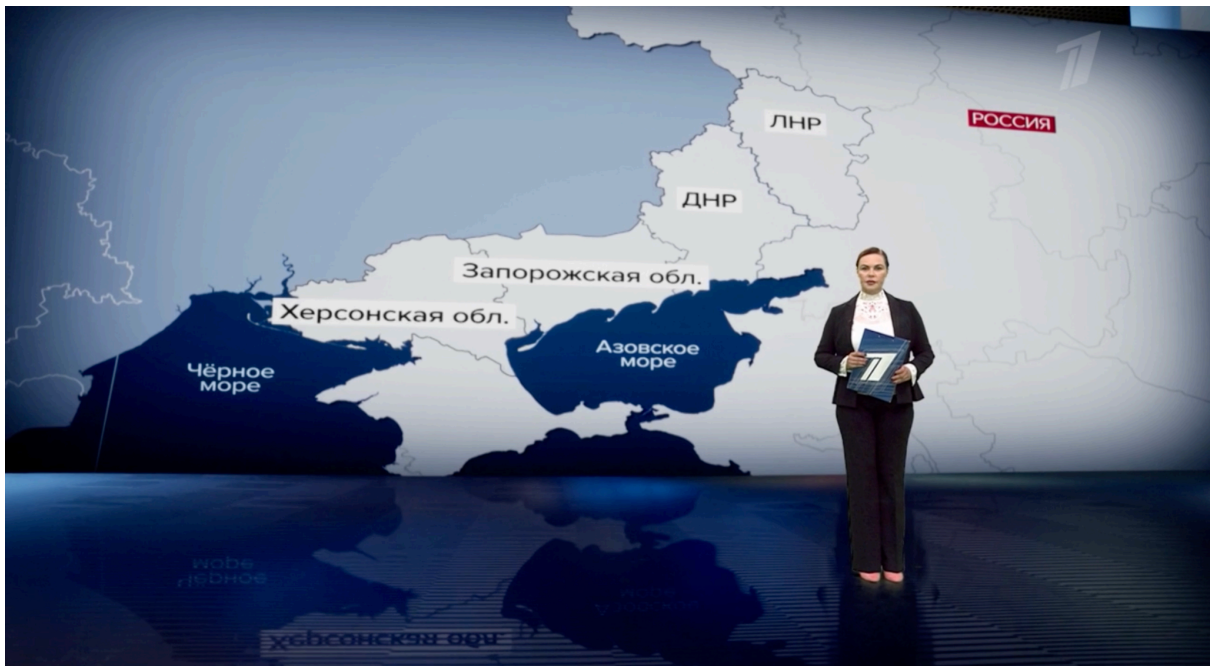
*Image 10: Ekaterina Andreeva, the host of "Vremya," presents the new map of Russia,
(30 September, 2022, Vremya)*

Image 11, on the left: The occupied cities are added to the news programme's weather cast (in the photo: Melitopol, Donetsk and Luhansk), (October 6, 2022, Vremya).

Image 12, on the right: The map of Russia and the region presented by Channel One (March 15, 2023, Vremya).

Absolute truths

"It has been long overdue. Enough of borders. Since back in 1991 it was not right." in a September 20, 2022 report about the willingness of the people of the eastern Ukrainian disputed region an interviewee from Luhanks, as Channel One marked a location bug above his head specifying the place of footage as "Lugansk Republic." The interviewee is followed by another man in the vox-pop asserting, "Our city was founded by Catherine the Great, those are all Russian lands, therefore these have always been [inaudable] Russia's. Russia united all Slavic nations, therefore, I think is timely." The correspondent then introduces sound bites from the Russian Duma, with the head of the Russian parliament urging — "think what would have happened if the President didn't make the decision of the special military operation" and calling for support for state security. This rhetorical strategy of the reference serves as an example of legitimisation of actions by referring to a threat from the future requiring immediate action (Dunmire 2007; Reyes, 2011). This portrayal of actions as **"inevitable,"** aligns with the notion of normalisation discussed by Fairclough (2002) and Gavriel-Nury (2013), framing them as "deserving of support."

The first quote selected by Channel One allegedly highlights as "not right" the 1991 "separation" of the eastern Ukrainian regions from Russia (in this case: the Soviet Union), a recurring theme in the channel news broadcast. This is often contextualised in opposition to the **"right deed,"** a prevalent frame used to justify Russian expansionism, currently towards Ukraine, but also more broadly concerning other countries of the region, under the guise of "historical justice." This framing seeks to accumulate public support and approval through the justification of a "common" goal. Amidst the evident dominance of authoritative voices included in the news broadcast, the vox-pop genre of information gathering is exclusively applied by Channel One for rather affirmative reasons, where ordinary citizens are featured to confirm the claims made by authoritative voices. Such an example is from the reportage the day after the previous vox-pop. In a video featured from the western Russian city of Ulyanovs, two women are filmed in their home watching the address of the Russian President and confirming his claims (21 September 2022, Channel One). The dominant frame of "Russia is doing wight" underscores the television's coverage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The previous chapter examined the techniques Channel One employed to naturalise the "shared reality" of public support for the state's irredentist policies. In this search for

approval, the frame of "right thing to do," is another frame to rationalise and legitimise state actions, defining them as *right,* and *just*. The "right" and the "appropriate," in this context are both discussed as "sociocultural conceptualisations" (Silverstein, 2004), defined and shaped within a social group. Moreover, the "right thing to do" is defined as something that "makes sense" within and for a cultural community, in legitimising the action-taking through rationality (Reyes, 2011). Through its news coverage, Channel One not only transmitted political speeches about the "right deeds," but also sought a definition for the "right" itself.

"Just cause": with a big headline announcing the beginning of the daily news agenda, the channel started its news program on 26 February 2023, attaching it to the president's quote claiming: "We (Russia) defend the lives of our people, our native home, while the goal of the West is infinite power." In an encouraging tone of voice, the host adds to the authoritative quote: "The victory will be ours." Reyes (2011) discussed how the contextual setting validates and enables the political authority to present their goals as the truth, by consequently also validating the truth or credibility of the political message, and the perceived truthfulness of the discourse, which in turn legitimises the taken action.

In constructing or transmitting this "truthfulness" Channel One involved and employed various instruments of social, and political actors and media agents - utilising a range of techniques to present the discourses of its agenda as a "truth." In a report covering the address of Vladimir Putin to the Russian Federal Assembly in the programme from February 21, 2023, the correspondent ended the report with a quote from the president assuring the assembly: "Russia will respond to any challenges because we are all one country, one big and united nation, we are confident in ourselves, confident in our strength. *The truth is on our side*" (Putin, Channel One, 21 February 2023). Immediately after, the host introduces a reportage about a marine brigade's participation in the war on Ukraine, titled "The truth is on our side" ("За нами правда"). It is also in this context that legitimisation through "theoretical rationalisation" (Leeuwen, 2007) occurs, appearing to be grounded in some "truth," which is a part of the social knowledge, referencing "the way things are," as through a process of naturalisation these "things" are perceived as the correct course of action (Leeuwen, 2007, Reyes, 2011).
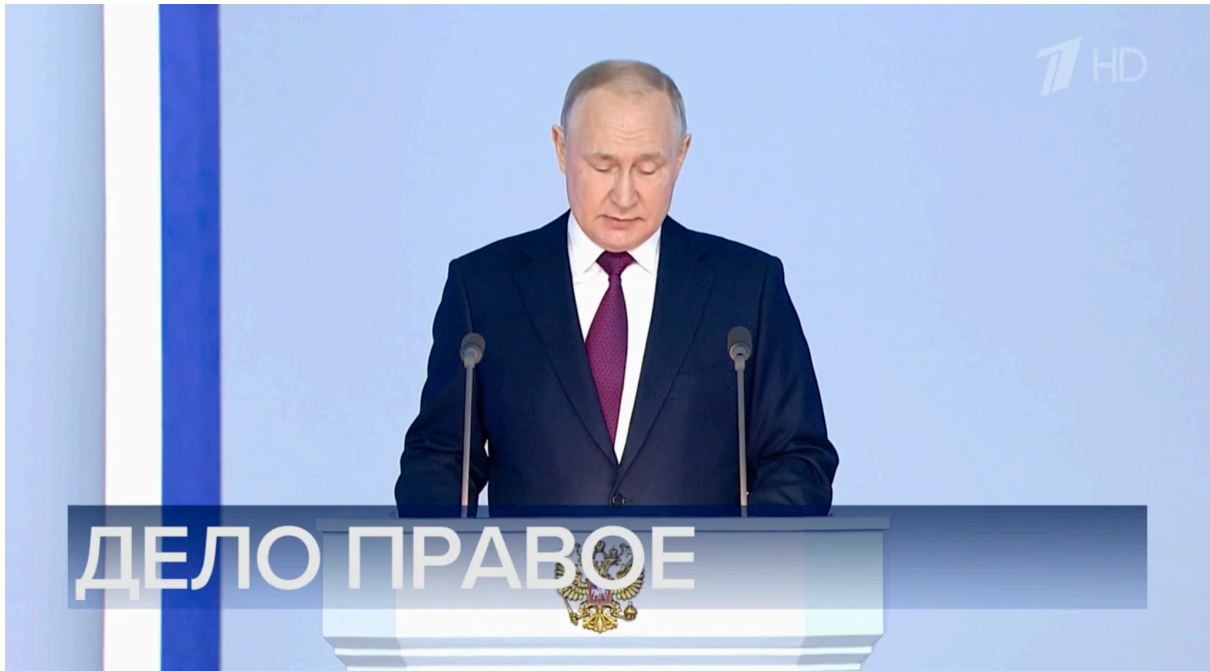
Image 10: "Just cause": the headline of the report covering the address of Vladimir Putin to the Russian Federal Assembly (February 26, 2023, Vremya)

This repetition of asserting "truth" is a consistent feature observed throughout Channel One's news coverage, often applied to high-ranking state officials. In the news programme of February 22, 2023, Valentina Matviyenko, the Chairwoman of Russia's Federation Council, is quoted saying — "the truth is on our side" while speaking about Russia's "historic right to be a great power." Later in that week, in the news programme of February 26, the recording of Matviyenko's quote was featured once again. Moreover, in this context, the way these official statements are presented resembles contributions to the political goals of politicians, which are presented as the goals of their audiences (Reyes, 2011).

"And just like that Russia asserts the rightness of its deed," the host of the news programme from February 24, 2023 comments as the broadcast features Vasily Nebenza, the Russian representative to the UN, calling for a minute of silence for all victims of the conflict to the UN Security Council, in response to an earlier minute of silence for those dead in aftermath of Russian aggression. This use of absolutist language goes beyond the direct discussions around "thoughtfulness," and definitions of what is "right and wrong" and is inserted in the political strategy of Channel One, framing the presented reality as the only existing truth and the "absolute right," in the absence of critical approach without leaving any room for questioning the presented information.

"We would *certainly* like to turn this page, with these people who are practically *already our* compatriots. *Nobody in Donbas doubts the outcome of the referendum.* But *we have to* defend - over and over again, not something far away and hypothetic, we defend our homeland, our home" (21 September 2022, Channel One), days before the results of the referendum in the annexed regions would be known, the correspondent of Channel One, covered them, claiming "no one doubts" the outcome of them, although even the television presented surveys do not confirm a total concensus. This assertation of the "inevitable" and "absolute" outcome exemplifies the typical linguistic approach of the channel's coverage of sensitive issue and is observed continuously particularly in the narration strategies of the correspondents. The reality is portrayed as singular and unchallenged with no alternatives. For instance, in the opening of the news programme on October 9, 2022, the host starts his annotation with a direct decree-like statement pronouncing "Donbas, Kherson and Zaporozhskie regions are *ours. This is beyond debate*," while announcing a report on Putin's claims of the referendum's transparency in the annexed regions as "unquestionable." (Channel One, 9 October 2022). This repetition of absolute truth language also reinforces the particular self-representation of Russia.

"*Only* Russia could have saved them (the population of Donbas) from Kyiv combatants firing the peaceful towns of Donbas," the Channel One correspondent asserts in his text (October 1, 2023). This "*only* Russia" exclusivist approach to covering certain topics of particular foreign affairs interest, extends beyond the Russian war in Ukraine, and with the imperial and "civilisational" notion, is evident in coverage of other conflicts and political issues of the region, particularly idealising the Russian peacekeepers stationed in the region. The Russian troops in Transnistria are portrayed as "the guarantors of the stability" (February 24, 2023, Channel One), and in Nagorno-Karabakh as "the *only* hope." (September 22, 2023, Channel One). "Do we understand it correctly that our peacekeepers are the *only* obstacle to the ethnic cleansing in Nagorno-Karabakh?" asks the Channel One correspondent to the Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov, following a report on the situation developing in the disputed region after the Azerbaijani takeover (Channel One, 20 September 2023). "The events of previous years, like today, have shown that *only* Moscow is capable of stopping the bloodshed in Karabakh," in a concluding note adds the journalists, reinforcing the Russian "messianic" discourse of foreign affairs. These non-compromising and absolute "truths" are constructed not only through exaggerations but also by completely excluding dissenting opinions. This strategy of silencing and blurring what is against the dominant frame, or delegitimising it, as part of a set of normalisation strategies is discussed in the next chapters.

Denial of sovereignty

"Georgia is not a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, but *it is not a foreign country* (to Russia), especially given what is happening there now," the Channel One host introduces a report about massive anti-government protests in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi (March 10, 2023, Channel One). In a continuing text leading to a reportage about the protests, the presenter manipulates linguistic references, linking the Georgian word for "square" - "*moedani*" with the Euromaidan protests of 2013 in Kyiv, which are regularly portrayed by the news programme as the "genesis" of the conflict with Russia. The host asserts: "With the Maidan in Kyiv, the similarity in sound is not the only resemblance. Kiril Branin (the Channel One reporter) will **prove it**". Along the lines of another example of using a language of absolute and "provable" truth, this news text exemplifies Channel Once's imperialism approach towards the network's view of the region — delegitimising certain institutions of these states, sometimes to the extent of denying their "foreignness" and sovereignty. Academic literature on normalisation broadly discussed the (pre)legitimisation as a means of the normalisation process (Gavriel-Nuri, 2013; Krzyżanowski, 2020), however, the research on *de*legitimisation as a media normalisation technique is relatively limited. This thesis suggests that among other normalisation techniques, the state-controlled Channel One employs a (post)colonial approach to delegitimisation of certain aspects of self-governance, or in certain cases to a complete degree, by rejecting their ability to be sovereign.

During the study period, Channel One's reportages on Georgia focused exclusively on the protests in the country, framing them within the context of portrayed Western geopolitical dominance in the country. This aligns with the channel's broader approach of covering not only Georgia but also Ukraine, where the Russian invasion of the country is not fully acknowledged as a war against Ukraine but against the "collective West." While Ukraine receives coverage from various angles, due to the irredentist reasons discussed in this thesis, including the denial of Ukrainian statehood, the denial of the legitimate governments in other regional countries is the dominant frame particularly for Moldova and Armenia, and to a different degree in Georgia.

In covering Moldova, Georgia and Armenia, besides the territorial conflicts these countries inherited with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the channel focuses predominantly on protests and public demonstrations against the country governments. When conflicts are the main focus, especially in Moldova and Armenia, they are often presented alongside or

through the lens of public dissent against their "West-aligned" governments. This coverage is almost always seasoned with a high degree of cynical comments, sarcastic vocabulary and personal mockery of these countries' leaders, or in the case of Georgia, leaders of the domestic opposition. The government of these countries, especially in Moldova and to a lesser extent in Armenia, are being portrayed as incompetent. In an intriguing frame-shift, while covering the anti-government protests in Georgia, against the "foreign influence" law, similar to what Russia has on its own, Channel One emphasises the "democratically elected" nature of the Georgian government. In contrast, the authorities in Ukraine, Moldova and Armenia are presented as ruling against the will of the majority and being appointed by the West (e.g., February 19, 2023, Channel One).

"Moldova currently is led by a pro-American puppet president Maia Sandu," asserts the Channel One host in her opening text to a reportage about Transnistria, potential Ukrainian "provocations" there and protests in Moldova. Sandu is a frequent target of the channel, often mocked and portrayed as inept. "Perhaps she thinks of herself as a historical figure too," the journalist, concludes the report mentioning her, clearly ridiculing her. In the same report, Sandu is not the only politician ridiculed, and in the context of the Western involvement in the conflicts of the region, archival footage of Georgia's ex-president Michail Saakashvili being caught on camera chewing his tie during the 2008 war with Russia is shown. Similarly, the Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan is depicted as someone who is "being dictated" and fulfils "a task given by the West" (September 24, 2023; October 1, 2023, Channel One). Through this framing, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia and Georgia are portrayed as "hostages" to the West, with their leaders pictured as incompetent puppets and their countries in chaos, which is in sharp contrast with the self-representation of Russian authorities as knowledgeable and effective managers.

"*Our* Foreign Ministry announced that the government in Yerevan is making a mistake by trying to damage the centuries-old ties of Armenia and Russia, making their country a hostage to geopolitical games of the West. This, *our* diplomats are sure, is acknowledged by the *vast majority* of the people of Armenia. *And here is the proof* — in the evening in Yerevan people gathered for a protest to demand Pashinyan's resignation," introducing another report about protests in Armenia asserts the host of the news programme (September 25, 2023, Channel One). The delivered text manipulates and merges two unrelated to each other events, as the protests later presented in the report concern the government's stance on the Nagorno-Karabah conflict, and the decision not to intervene in the Azerbaijani takeover of the disputed region, and have no reference to Russian-Armenian

relations. This serves as another example of Channel One's journalistic practices of centering developments in these countries exclusively through the Kremlin view, and/or through a geopolitical confrontation with the West. This often involves journalists indirectly addressing threatening notes to the neighbouring nations in their journalistic texts. For example, "The desire of the West to flare up another conflict near Russia, for Moldova and entire Moldovian nation might turn to a catastrophe" (February 19, 2023, Channel One correspondent), "*We would like to remind the Georgian authorities* — in 2014 in Ukraine as well they tried to make concessions with the rebels, how did it end back then and what it turned today is well-known" (March 9, 2023, Channel One correspondent), "Perhaps they understand well, that, the West does not care about the fates of tens of thousands refugees (from Nagorno-Karabakh), neither the future of the prime minister Pashinyan, in case he does not understand it." (October 1, 2023, Channel One correspondent). Those are some of the examples demonstrating how Channel One's journalists go beyond the news journalism practices and directly or indirectly incorporate their self-articulated threats into their coverage of the former Soviet countries.

In this normalisation process of (de)legitimisation, the representation of geography plays an important role, involved both in the journalistic texts and visual representation in the news. The journalists referred to disputed or unrecognised territorial entities within internationally recognised borders of these states using terms that lack international consensus and officially are not recognised, even by Russia itself. For example, a correspondent of the news programme refers to the disputed Transnistria region as "Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic," the name used by the breakaway region as its official name (February 19, 2023, Channel One), thereby seeking legitimisation for these entities. In a more subtle assertation of imperialism views, Channel One journalists express this (post)colonial notion through specific toponyms they use in reference to the geographic regions or countries of the study focus. Notable examples include the reference to the South Caucasus as "Zakavkaziye" ("Transcaucasus") (e.g., September 24, 2023, Channel One), with literal translates in Russian as "beyond/behind the Caucasus," reflecting a colonial perspective by framing it from Russian-centric viewpoint (Ter-Matevosyan, 2023). Similarly, the use of names for Moldova reflects a preference given to Soviet-time "Moldavia," rather than the country's current official name, (Republic of) Moldova. Additionally, Belarus (the official name of the country, also in Russian), is referred to as "Belorussiya" — traditionally the Soviet name of the country (Deutsche Welle, 2009). Unlike Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and especially Ukraine, Belarus had a minimal representation in Channel One's news

program and more served as a "supporting actor" – an alternative way of sovereignty representation.

Image 11: The pro-war "Z" symbol on a Soviet flag featured by "Vremya" in a report about a soldier fighting in Donetsk (September 23, 2022, Vremya).

Belarus is mostly mentioned in the "side" role of Russia's actions, and in the context of deepening cooperation within the Union State, a political integrational union between Russia and Belarus (e.g., October 14, 2022; September 15, 2023). In a report about the mutually growing union of these two countries, Channel One's journalist referred to a Soviet perception of Belarus as an "assembly workshop," to construct hist text about the currently producing details for Russian plains (February 17, 2022). This representation of "partnership" is also applied to Azerbaijan, which was solely represented as a "partner," or "ally" (e.g., February 28, 2023; September 26, 2022), without sovereignty denial narratives. Unlike the other countries, Azerbaijan and Belarus were exclusively covered from the perspective of their foreign affairs with Russia, and no domestic developments were featured in the news coverage. In this context, the position of Belarus, and particularly its country Leader Alexander Lukashenko, is used to contribute to other forms of normalisation discussed in this thesis, where Belarus is presented as identical with Russia, sharing the same collective "we," having the same "course" and goals (September 26, 2022, Channel One).

In a report about a Lukashenko-Putin meeting the Belarusian leader is quoted by the channel saying: "I watched the news in the morning, the entire Europe is seething. The richest Germany — everyone is in the streets, everyone protests. Will you hear about that? I hope they will. Therefore, *our* course is right, *our deed is right*, *we will win*" (September 26, 2022, Channel One). This framing supports the normalisation techniques of dichotomy, and the construction of the "just cause," through the manipulative use of language and generalised statements about the "other." It also places Belarus and Russia within one "we," presenting them as identical, while also contributing to another normalisation technique through imagined idealistic present and the future.

"Happy" Ending

"And this was all. *Everything will be good*," concludes the host of "Vremya," before announcing a new series about Imperial Russia of Peter I time, to follow the news programme (29 September 2022, Channel One). The promised "good" hypothetical future is not an isolated example of positive spin featured by Channel One's news journalism, particularly when the subject is the "us." This positive portrayal contrasts with scaremongering when the covered subject is "them," and is part of a broader concept of what Gavriel-Nury (2013), among the normalisation strategies described as *euphemisation* — giving a positive character to a certain concept, like a war, and presenting them as a "special opportunity." In the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this "special opportunity" was framed directly, starting from the state propaganda level of framing the invasion as a "special military operation".

In the channel's news coverage, the word "war" is used only in reference to military actions presumably not directly involving Russia or the Russian army. Additionally, terms like "economic war," and "war against *our* country" (October 13, 2022, Channel One) are corporated in the journalistic texts — however, all instances framing the "war" exclusively presented as an action taken *against* Russia. In the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the term "war" is used only within the effort of confrontation with the "collective West." For instance, describing the Western military support for Ukraine, the Channel One journalist reasoned it with the Western motivation "to continue *the war* till the last Ukrainian" (17 September 2023). At the same time, when covering the updates from the front or the special correspondence from the conflict zone, neither the journalists nor the hosts refer to the Russian military actions as a "war," instead calling it a "special military operation." This omission of the war characteristic, including the complete exclusion of the word "war" is another strategy of normalisation, described by Gavriel-Nury (2013) as "symbolic annihilation," which involves blurring the fundamental characteristics of war. Gorobets (2022), argued that, unlike the word "war," the term "special military operation" does not imply equal status, and is indicative of the "language of policing," a part of the imperialistic narrative, suggesting that Russia employs force within its own domain. The evidence of calling the war on Ukraine a "war", hoverer, is not exclusively an editorial policy of Channel One, but is a state policy, involving war-time censorship, banning the use of words "invasion," "attack" or "war." The downplaying of significant or major events and their euphemisation in the process of normalisation is also notable in Channel One's coverage of

the mobilisation of draftees in Russia, as the term "mobilisation" is always accompanied by the adjective "partial" — seeking minimisation of the scale of the event. In this normalisation process, "Vremya" also downplays the significance of certain dates. We previously discussed the memory politics of the Chanel One, and typical for the channel's news broadcast remembrance of important anniversaries, and dates, but the remembrance of these dates is also highly selective. While the news programme reported on anniversaries of events such are Liberation on Novorossiysk during the "Great Patriotic War" (September 16, 2023, Channel One), or the anniversary of the Nord Stream pipeline explosion, it omitted, for example, any mention of the anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2023. Instead, on the day the broadcast focused on potential "Ukrainian provocations" in Transnistria and Chinese tourists travelling to Russia, influenced by the Chinese-Russian friendship (24 February 2023, Channel One).

The positive spin is particularly observed in reportages from the occupied settlements of Ukraine, more often Mariupol - a southeastern Ukrainian port-city, that was one of the first Russian targets and hotspots of the Russian full-scale invasion. Mariupol became internationally known for the devastation and rubble left after a brutal siege of the town. While Channel One's coverage did not completely ignore the devastation of the city, it is completely attributed to the shelling of the Ukrainian army. In the news coverage, the focus instead is shifted to the reconstruction effort in the city, following the annexation of the region. "With Russia, they (the people of Mariupol) will build a new future. This grandiose joint project is already in progress. Construction workers from different regions of what is now already one big country are rebuilding Donbas. In place of what was destroyed by the neo-Nazis, residential buildings and hospitals are rising. From the ruins, kindergartens and schools are emerging," narratives the correspondent of Channel One in a reportage from Mariupol (October 1, 2022, Channel One).

These narratives contribute to the constructed reality of one big, unified country, with a common goal, portraying the annexed regions as reborn and part of Russia's irredentist ambitions. Similarly, reports from Mariupol and other occupied settlements are presented within the framework of normalisation as a process of bringing things to "normalness." In some instances these war-resulted changes are presented not only as "back to normal," ("New residential areas grow like mushrooms," Channel One correspondent, February 19, 2023; "...Mariupol is back to peaceful life," Channel One correspondent, September 17, 2022) but also as advancement, and as an opportunity, further contributing to the process of naturalisation. In portrayal of the war-ruined city, Channel One only portrayed the

reconstruction effort, alongside the local gratitude for it, eventually sidelining the less favourable scenes of destruction, framing the life in the city carrying on as normal, and framing them as positive changes in the lives of people. Presenting the annexation of Ukrainian regions as an opportunity for those who are living in this region, however, entangles another layer of imperial/colonial approach to the issue. Alongside the normalisation effort, in contrast with the new "promising" life, the old one is presented as "unadvanced" and "backwards," as Russia portrayed bringing people of Donbas hospitals and schools, they claim they were deprived of under Ukrainian rule. This framed "backwardness" and Russian "civilisational" and "altruistic" acts are comparable to the notion of inter-imperial "integration" design (Boatcă and Parvulescu, 2020) (e.g., 27 September 2022; 21 February 2023, Channel One).

This series of frames — depicting the ongoing situation both in the annexed regions, in Russia itself and its relations with the other countries, contributed to a wider theme and techniques of presenting that "everything is under control." Although this normalisation attempt is predominantly applicable to the rare domestic coverage of Channel One, such as when the authorities face unpredictable incidents, or assignments by the presidents or the Prime Minister to the government, and sanctions-related challenges, the narratives of depicting as "everything is in order" extends beyond the internal issues. It becomes a frame for foreign coverage as well and naturalises the favourable issues, tends to normalise prospective or likely threats to the status quo, aligning with what Baran and Davis (2012) defined as *normalised* news. Moreover, in the process of normalising the news, the elites - presented as authoritative and knowledgeable are allowed to explain disasters and are capable of bringing things back to normal, further enabling what Leeuwen (2007) defined as "authorisation," and "accrediting" argumentation, which Reyes (2011) classified as legitimation through voices of expertise.

"Sergei Shoigu, who recently returned from the special military operation zone, brought *good news* from the frontline," begins a Channel One correspondent in reportage about at that time Russian Minister of Difence's attendance at a ministry meeting (March 7, 2023, Channel One). The "good news" referred to by the journalist includes the "liberation" of several settlements and the death of another over eleven thousand Ukrainian soldiers. This narrative draws a parallel between "them" — "the indifferent to its nation Kyive regime" and "us," who "prioritises the lives of the civilians and soldiers." This frame-shifting of territorial advances and claimed a high number of Ukrainian casualties as "good news" further covers the developments which result in significant loss of life in a positive light through linguistic

manipulation, legitimisation and distinctions between the "us" and "them," placing the Channel's coverage of the irredentist war within the concept of "normal."

Throughout the four-month-long data collection, every broadcast of "Vremya" included in its news agenda a communiqué (svodka) by the state's Ministry of Defense. In this segment, the official representative of the Defense Ministry — dressed in military uniform and employing military propaganda rhetoric — announces Russian claims of Ukrainian military casualties, both personnel and equipment. These statements are always incorporated into the news programme without further commentary by the channel's journalistic and with no mention of the unsubstantiated nature of the reported numbers. Additionally, the channel added to the communiqué visual illustrations, providing visualisations for the official numbers. While these daily reports of Ukrainian casualties at the same time completely excluded mention of any civilian Ukrainian casualties, civilian deaths in Donbas were covered extensively, through special reportages, and personalised narratives (e.g., September 20, 2022; March 4, 2023, Channel One).

This discursive strategy of euphumisation, through a series of repetitive patterns, aligns with the *symbolic annihilation* - where "their" casualties are flagged, and "good," while there is no mention of the damage the war causes to "us." This repetitive daily reporting of casualties of "them" cratered a pattern of "normality" of the casualties, placing them in the pattern of naturalisation, omitting some of the essential characteristics of the "abnormality" and reasoning it by "greater purposes." In the context of normalising the death of "them," Channel One's journalistic texts rarely mentioned casualties among Russian troops, except to report that "there were no casualties among *ours*" (e.g., September 29, 2022, Channel One). The names of killed Russian soldiers were only revealed in the context of their glorification, such as when naming military objects after them (e.g., 18 February 2023, Channel One). Although the death of soldiers was not announced, ceremonial events glorifying them became televised media events. The heroisation of those living soldiers who fought for Donbas was featured daily in the news broadcast. Through commentaries of the programme hosts, the "names of *our* heroes" were presented in each news program, with stories of a few soldiers (usually 2, sometimes more) with a brief account of their "heroism." In this course, the Channel One journalists also assumed the authority to define what constitutes "heroism" and what does not — by labelling participants in certain war-related events as "heroes" (e.g., 13 October 2022, Channel One). This heroification is often accompanied by the dehumanisation of the adversary. Notably, in many instances, the adversary's "them," is not mentioned as a nation, with "Ukraianain" replaced by

dehumanising adjectives like "neo-nazis" or "nationalists." (e.g.: "Efreytor Andrei Dubotovkin.. destroyed (*unichtozhil*) four nationalists, the Ukrainian sabotage group retreated. There are no casualties among *ours*," states the host, as the photo of the soldier is shown on the screen (29 September 2022, Channel One). This strategy fits within "the fairy tale of a just war" - portraying a villain, victim and hero (Lakoff 1991, Reyes, 2011).

Additionally, militaristic features, including the defeat and the death of the "enemy" are delivered through news "gamification" strategies, using "playful methods" to captivate the audience (Ferrer-Conill et al., 2020, p. 458). This includes video-game-like drone footage, "point of view" format footage filmed by the channel's correspondents themselves reportedly from the military actions, real-life footage of killing Ukrainian soldiers, and complex graphic images that gamify the death, as well as presenting the advance of the Russian army — granting these events with not only positive nature but an "entertaining" character.

Image 12, on the left: In the news studio, the "Vremya" uses complex visual graphic design, as Ekaterina Berezovskaya, the host of the programme, presents the T-80 tanks and their contribution to the "special military operation" (September 17, 2023, Vremya)

Image 13, on the right: "Vremya" displays night-vision drone footage of Ukrainian troops before showing a Russian artillery strike on Ukrainian soldiers (September 17, 2023, Vremya).

Discussion

Normalisation, as argued by Foucault (2007), occurs through the interplay of different sets of "normalities," using similar discursive strategies. This thesis examines and outlines the key techniques employed by state-controlled Channel One to reinforce the state's expansionist policies in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, seeking normalisation for these perspectives. In alignment with the proposed hypothesis, the research identifies the methods employed by Channel One in normalising the state's irredentist policies and imperialist aspirations. The identified keyframes include a journalistic accent on portraying both as a victim to the "collective West" and a dominant power in its "neighbourhood," aligning with previous research on Russia's post-imperial condition, and its "othering" between the West and East, within the context of Eurasianism (Toal, 2017; Sagramoso, 2020; Sasse, 2022).

Previous research extensively examines Russian justifications for the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine, there is also research on the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 (Zavershinskaia, 2024; Hilpold, 2023; Burai, 2015), however, the regional overview of the media representation and coverage policies of addressing the broader political Eastern European region is limited. This research extended the analysis of representations of Russian imperialism assertion towards less-studied countries in the region. During the selected period, which was chosen for its time relevance and best representation of an implementation of normalisation of irredentist policies following the annexation of four eastern Ukrainian regions, Channel One's coverage was predominantly focused on the war in Ukraine, leaving limited space for coverage of other countries in the region. Armenia and Azerbaijan received relatively more attention because of the flare-up of the conflict between the two countries and the Russian engagement in it, and Moldova was highlighted due to its breakaway region of Transnistria and its proximity to the ongoing war in Ukraine, as well as the possibility of becoming a next hotspot, with these countries approached in a context of delegitising their sovereignty or parts of it, while the representation of Belarus and Azerbaijan was minimal.

In this context, the research examines the channel's framing of the nationalist approach to irredentism, significantly influenced by the division between "us" and "them." A notable finding, often overlooked in previous research on Russian propaganda, is the direct journalistic involvement in the banal nationalist construction of "we" and "the other." The thesis analysed how the editorial representatives, including programme anchors and news

correspondents, positioned themselves within the portrayed collective endorsement of the country's irredentist approach towards neighbouring states. Tolz and Teper (2018) argued that celebrity journalists in Russian state-controlled media perceive their role as co-producers of official discourse and the "approved system of values," rather than being mere disseminators of it. Moreover, they are permitted and expected, to propose interpretations and narratives concerning ongoing events. The journalistic approaches of endorsement for the state's expansionist policies analysed by this study can be useful for future research of understanding the journalistic contribution to establishing or reinforcing social norms, and endorsement of authoritarian politics. The thesis contributes significantly to understanding not only the normalisation process through state-controlled television and media in general but also the specific journalistic involvement in the naturalisation process of establishing or reinforcing social norms and supporting authoritarian politics. In this context, one of the major techniques identified by the thesis includes the construction of a new reality, and attributing to it a shared, dominant and universally supported character, celebrated nationally.

While prior research on Russian propaganda (e.g., Herpen, 2015; Lukyanova, 2018; Marandici, 2023), predominantly focused on the analysis of political speeches and the Russian model of political communication and framing, this thesis examined the editorial approach to the normalisation of irredentist political agendas. The study's focus is to understand normalisation techniques, rather than making the frames the central focus. At the same time, the qualitative research on the normalisation process through the editorial text and visualisation choices was conducted entirely through desk research. This approach involving analysing already broadcasted journalistic text and visual material, does not allow an assessment of a range of factors influencing journalistic decisions of contribution to the normalisation process of the irredentist domain. Self-censorship is widespread within the community of journalists employed by Russian state television and can impact their reporting (Bodrunova et al., 2020), and this research did not measure the extent to which self-censorship contributed to the absolute absence of critical reporting on matters concerning irredentism. Although general research on the Russian community of state-controlled television has found that journalists practise self-censor intentionally (Schimpfössl and Yablokov, 2014), further research is needed to examine the journalistic choices in the neo-authoritarian media environment and their role in the normalisation process. Although specific to the Russian media environment and Channel One's editorial policy, many of the investigated normalisation techniques extend beyond Channel One and were identified in the past by researchers such as Gavriel-Nuri (2013) or Fairclough (2002) in wider arrays of

normalisation beyond the media. The thesis findings align with previous research on the normalisation of "controversial" social issues and "abnormalities" observed in other conflicts, and studied by Gavriely-Nuri (2013), though with specificities nuances special for the Russian media environment. The research is also consistent with Krzyżanowski's work on normalisation through frame-shifting, divisions, and legitimisation.

Rozneas and Stukal (2019) proposed that state-controlled television does not censor bad news on several politically significant economic issues, but rather attributes them to external factors, while the good news is credited to domestic politicians. This research agrees with the suggestion of the authors on systematic attribution of challenging conditions, particularly economic challenges amid the Western sanctions against Russia, and at the same time the local authorities, firstly the state president and secondly the prime minister of the state, are being portrayed as "effective managers." However, the thesis argues that in the period of the research, there was no evidence to support the claim that state-controlled television does not censor bad news. Instead, it suggests that bad news is replaced with positive narratives, and interprets problems from a perspective of an achievement, accomplished or an opportunity.

This research further contributes to normalisation studies and understanding of introducing and fostering new norms, and the role of the media in this process. However, it is limited in its capacity to measure the extent to which Channel One's presented discourse altered the public perception of the irredentist issues. While in its introduction the thesis draws a parallel between the reported massive support for Russia's irredentist policies among the Russian public, this research does not aim to determine the specific influence of "Vremya" on public opinion. Acknowledging that as one of the most trusted and popular information sources, Channel One contributes to guiding the public perception of the norms and normalisation of the political process, the research does not isolate its influence from the broader societal context. The normalisation efforts involve various agents, including political and social campaigns, other media outlets, education system of the country. Additionally, in certain cases, it is challenging to define where is the line between the norms introduced by the television, and those already present in the society, the journalists themselves are part of. Nevertheless, given the direct connection between the state and state-controlled television in Russia, Channel One's role in the normalisation process and reinforcing these norms is perceived as significant. While this research focuses specifically on normalisation through news journalism, to understand the broader scale of the normalisation effort by state-controlled television, further research is needed to examine other media formats, such as

talk shows, documentaries and films, as well as entertainment events. As briefly mentioned in the findings, the channel's news program hosts endorsed the films, concerts and other forms of popular culture pieces endorsing Russia's imperialist past after the news program in the form of films, and documentaries, that are beyond the scope of this study, but are crucial for analysing the complete context of the television's normalisation efforts.

On the other hand, the comprehensive data collected and analysed over the four-month period provides a solid foundation for understanding the key normalisation strategies employed by state-controlled television strategies. These findings suggest a critical approach to analysing journalistic standards of news reporting and their involvement in neo-authoritarian media environments and can inform future research on television's role in establishing societal norms, both in Russia, and globally. Further, this thesis draws attention to the use of the *language of "absolute truths"* in journalistic texts as a means of representing information as uncompromising and unquestionably aligned with reality. While the representation of "truth" is studied in journalism in the context of disinformation (George, 2022; Waisbord, 2018), the impact of absolutist language in journalism, and the journalistic contribution to the definition of "uncompromising" truths remains uninvestigated. This research aims to contribute to the examination of such language and its role in the normalisation process and broader linguistic strategies employed by media in authoritarian regimes.

Although the thesis specifically examines the case of Russian television, and its approach to covering irredentism, within the broader concept of nationalistic representation, the influence of nationalism on journalism and the implication of irredentism in this context is not unique to Russia. These implications extend beyond its borders, including to certain countries of the research interest, particularly in the South Caucasus and other European regions, such as the Balkans. This research has the potential to inform the understanding of the media representation or irredentist policies and their normalisation in other contexts, especially within authoritarian media environments.

Conclusion

In the context of rising authoritarianism globally, and particularly in the Eastern European region, authoritarian powers such as Russia have effectively utilised control over mainstream media to frame public opinion, often emphasising nationalism with far-reaching implications. This thesis examines how Russian state-controlled television, specifically the nationally broadcast Channel One, normalises the state's irredentist doctrine and expansionist policies, thereby generating public support for these policies. The study analysed the primary frames and techniques employed by Channel One in its prime-time news coverage of the country's expansionist foreign policy, situating it within a broader context of Russia's contemporary irredentist aspirations through news journalism.

Through systematic monitoring of Channel One's news coverage, the research investigates the editorial strategies to normalise the state's imperial aspirations and irredentist policies within Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. The thesis identified that in the period following the February 2024 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, certain irredentist frames emphasising the nationalist-imperialist notion, including defining "us" versus "them" and the "other," became central to the channel's news coverage and dominated the discourse, often excluding other topics. These frames utilised the strategic use of memory politics to portray the country's imperial ambitions, securitisation of issues, and banal nationalist approach, contributing to the strategies and techniques to normalise the state's expansionist policies. The thesis reveals that Channel One actively engaged various societal segments in shaping a "new and shared reality," promoting it as universally supported and "unquestionable." The findings suggest that beyond "standard" journalistic practices of news coverage, the journalists and editorial personnel of Channel One are deeply involved, both professionally and personally, in embracing and normalising this state-promoted "new reality." This study contributes to the understanding of the normalisation process facilitated by state-controlled television in Russia, highlighting the role played by journalists and media representatives in this effort, both directly and indirectly.

The thesis demonstrated that Channel One's employed rhetoric seeks normalisation for Russia's irredentist actions also by framing them as historically justified and inevitable. By repeatedly asserting the "rightness" of these actions through the language of absolute truths, authoritative voices, celebrities and selective citizen testimonials, the channel suppressed dissent and by the selective representation of public opinion portrayed a "new"

reality. Additionally, the state's expansionist policies are normalised through both editorial endorsement and international validation to construct a narrative of a shared and widespread support for these policies, and reinforcing their legitimacy. Through repetitive frame-shifting, euphemisation and symbolic annihilation, as well as gamification, currently, in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the war is presented as something "special," as an opportunity, and its consequences are portrayed in a positive light, embedding or reinforcing in them a sense of "normality" and heroism. In a broader context of normalisation of geopolitical narratives, this was also possible through Channel One's effort to undermine the sovereignty, and in some cases, legitimacy of Russia's neighbouring countries, within post-colonial and imperialism perspectives in the representation of regional dynamics.

The extensive data collected and analysed on the journalistic approach to normalisation lays a foundation for future research on normalisation through media within the authoritarian context, particularly regarding irredentist politics. Future studies could explore the motivations of journalists to contribute to this normalisation process, in hostile to the journalism media environments. While this research focuses on a crucial aspect of news journalism in the process of normalisation, it acknowledges that news reporting is only one component within the arsenal available to the state-controlled television for normalisation, including documentaries, film and pop culture, whose role in normalisation is for the future investigation. Despite the decrease in television viewership in Russia, television remains a primary tool for influencing public opinion, and in the authoritarian-inforced information vacuum, the "norms" and "normalities" introduced through state-controlled television extend their influence beyond the television screens, setting agendas for the other media operating within the country. These disruptive strategies of naturalisation have the potential to make contentious state policies "normal" and resistant to criticism, further fostering an authoritarian climate.

Summary

V době rostoucího autoritářství ve světě, zejména ve východní Evropě, se autoritářské režimy, jako je Rusko, účinně chopily kontroly nad médii, aby mohly formovat veřejné mínění. Tato práce zkoumá, jak ruská státem kontrolovaná televize, konkrétně První kanál, normalizuje iredentistickou doktrínu a expanzivní politiku státu, a tím pro ni vytváří veřejnou podporu. Studie analyzuje primární rámce a techniky, které První kanál používá ve svém zpravodajství o ruském iredentismu, a zasazuje je do širšího kontextu imperialistických aspirací a historie země. Prostřednictvím systematického sledování zpravodajství Prvního kanálu výzkum zkoumá techniky normalizace iredentismu prostřednictvím zpravodajských relací v hlavním vysílacím čase. Zjištění pojednávají o aktivním zapojení různých společenských segmentů do definování "nové a sdílené reality" ze strany Prvního kanálu, o zavádění nových "norem" a jejich propagaci jako všeobecně podporovaných, podložených jazykem absolutních pravd, přičemž kritické hlasy jsou zcela vyloučeny. Studie přispívá k pochopení procesu normalizace, který v Rusku usnadňuje státem kontrolovaná televize, a zdůrazňuje roli, kterou v tomto úsilí přímo i nepřímo hrají novináři a zástupci médií. Práce dále poskytuje základ pro budoucí výzkum procesu normalizace prostřednictvím médií, zejména televize, v autoritářských a iredentistických kontextech.

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List of appendices

Appendix no. 1: The research-related frames of Channel One's "Vremya" news broadcast in selected programmes (tables)