

Final Report

Seipel, Putin, Mordashov and the *NDR*

1. Preliminary Remark

The investigation has found no evidence that anyone at *NDR*, at the production outfit Cinecentrum or at other broadcasting organisation involved in the Seipel productions knew about the Russian payments to Hubert Seipel, concealed them or even helped to collect them.

2. The Sponsorship Agreements

On 14 November 2023, *SPIEGEL*, together with *ZDF* and a number of international media such as the *Guardian* and *Washington Post*, revealed that award-winning filmmaker and Putin biographer Hubert Seipel had received hundreds of thousands of euros for his work from oligarch Alexei Mordashov, who is close to Putin. Corresponding evidence was found as part of the international research "Cyprus Confidential". Seipel has admitted to receiving such financial support from Mordashov.

The payments to Seipel were made as part of so-called "sponsorship contracts" for two book projects, one of which dates back to 2013, the second to 2018. *SPIEGEL* and *ZDF* claim to have access to the latter contract; the payments were intended for Seipel's book "Putin's Power. Why Europe needs Russia", was honoured with 600,000 and paid out in two tranches, 200,000 euros were paid in 2018, the rest in 2019.

The fact that there was already a similar agreement in 2013 for Seipel's first book, the Putin biography "Putin. Innenansichten der Macht" (published in 2015), can be assumed due to a handwritten note on the second contract, referring to the contract 2013. Seipel also confirmed this first contract to *NDR* and admitted that he had received a small six-figure sum in euros for it. Today, he regrets not having disclosed the contracts to *NDR*.

Therefore, money had already been paid before Seipel's interview with Vladimir Putin (broadcast in November 2014 as part of the *Günther Jauch* programme).

"The author is writing a book about the political environment in the Russian Federation, which is to be published in 2019," quoted *SPIEGEL* from the contract in March 2018. The book was not actually published until 2021. *SPIEGEL* further quoted: "The sponsor would like to support the development of the project and make this political and historical development accessible to a wider audience through the author's support." Seipel was

also to receive "logistical and organisational support" for the research.

The sponsor's payments were made by a letterbox company in the British Virgin Islands, which, according to *SPIEGEL research*, is part of the corporate network of Russian oligarch and long-time major shareholder of the German company TUI, Alexei Mordashov. He is now sanctioned by the European Union because of his closeness to Putin.

Seipel asserts that there are only these two contracts with Mordashov and that the money has been paid for research for his books. He had met the Russian entrepreneur, who speaks fluent German, at a public event and had met him several times thereafter. Mordashov had campaigned in various committees for the improvement of the German-Russian relations. He provided him with many important contacts for his book projects. Seipel claims that the sponsor had no influence on the content of his books and never got to see the manuscript. He denies that his impartiality was compromised and claims that, according to the contract, he had no "obligations to the sponsor in relation to the project (whether in terms of the content or composition of the book or otherwise) or its completion".

3. The Work Assignment

NDR has a different point of view: NDR suspects a conflict of interest because of the payments, as they cast doubt on the journalistic independence of the author. NDR managing director Joachim Knuth remarks the "suspicion that we, and therefore our audience, have been deliberately deceived". He has therefore commissioned us, the former *SPIEGEL* Editor Steffen Klusmann and the *NDR General Counsel* Michael Kühn, to thoroughly and carefully re-examine how the Seipel documentaries came about and to clarify whether

- did the payments influence Seipel's attitude towards Russia and thus his work for *NDR*?
- did anyone at *NDR* or at the production outfit Cinecentrum knew about the payments or was also remunerated from Russian sources?
- did the *NDR* fulfil its duty of care or was it too careless/uncritical in its dealings with Seipel?
- have there been warnings that were not taken seriously enough?
- can anything be learnt from this to prevent further incidents of this kind?

For this reconstruction of Seipel's work for *NDR* - he was employed there as a freelance author for over 10 years until 2019 - we contacted more than 40 people and spoke to many of them personally: the editors responsible for the films, the managers who authorised and approved Seipel's films, the producers and rights sellers, and of course those who were involved in the production of the documentaries. But we also spoke to

representatives of broadcasters who co-financed Seipel's films and those who would have preferred to prevent them. The discussions were mostly very co-operative and constructive, and all seemed interested in a reappraisal. Hubert Seipel himself answered our questions in writing, he was not available for a personal interview.

Names are only mentioned here if they have already appeared in the media with explicit statements or quotes.

We have concentrated on the contributors to the following Seipel films:

14.01.2009 "**Giant Gazprom**", *WDR*

27.02.2012 "**I, Putin**", *NDR*

13.02.2013 "**The Syria trap**", *NDR*

2013 1st sponsorship agreement

26.01.2014 "**Snowden Exclusiv - The Interview**", *NDR*

16.11.2014 "**Putin - The Interview**", *NDR*

06.02.2017 ARD Snowden film "**Tapped and nodded off**", *NDR*

2018 2nd sponsorship agreement

Except for the first production, for which *WDR* was in the lead, all these films were produced by Cinecentrum, a production outfit of Studio Hamburg. All the productions are dealing with Russia's geopolitical and strategic interests. All the findings from the discussions and research surrounding the production of the above-mentioned films have been incorporated into this report. We have written this report to the best of our knowledge and belief, independent of any influence by those involved or by *NDR* executives.

4 The Tens

Seipel's films stand out, especially in retrospect, for their one-sidedness and lack of criticism of Putin, the Kremlin and Russian interests. In his public appearances, Seipel always appealed for understanding for the sensitivities of the rulers in Moscow and relativised disinformation, for example, as a "normal game all over the world" and by no means just a "Russian speciality".

Seipel's books reveal "a frightening ignorance", was the judgement of Eastern European historian Franziska Davies in an article for *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. On the other hand, the author was in good company with his sympathy for Putin: a large part of the German population found the positions and arguments of the ruler in the Kremlin quite understandable. Regarding the overall cinematic programme on ARD, some of which was

quite critical of Putin at the time (Russisch Roulette, *WDR*, 2004; KGB in Deutschland, *MDR*, 2006; Wladimir Putin, *NDR*, 2008; Putins Russland, *NDR*, 2008; Götterdämmerung im Kreml, *WDR*, 2012; Brot und Spiele, *WDR*, 2014; Putins geheimes Privatvermögen, *MDR*, 2014; Putins Propagandakrieg, *MDR*, 2015; Putins leere Kassen, *WDR*, 2016), some interpreted Seipel's works as a beneficial counterpoint and contribution to the pluralistic discourse.

The Programme Advisory Board

In mid-June 2014, for example, the *ARD* Programme Advisory Board harshly criticised the coverage of the Ukraine crisis and felt compelled to carry out a "comprehensive programme monitoring". Their conclusion: Reporting of *das Erste* was too biased, too undifferentiated and too critical of Russia. The advisory board even went so far as to question whether the secession of Crimea was really an annexation (as most of the reports assumed) or merely a possible secession under international law? "It would appear that the naïve assessment of the Arab Spring is continuing in the reporting on the Ukraine crisis."

Regarding the Talkshow titles, which in the view of the advisory board were tendentiously anti-Russian, it said: "It would have been nice to read a title that was pointed in the opposite direction, such as 'Is the EU encircling Russia?'"

The Reviewer

In order to clarify how valuable Seipel's films really were for the pluralistic discourse of the decade, we asked Gesine Dornblüth to support us with her expertise. She is a recognised expert on Russia and was the Moscow correspondent for *Deutschlandradio* during the period in question, from early 2012 to early 2017. Since her return the freelance journalist and book author has been working at the journalist office *Texte und Töne*. Her book "Jenseits von Putin - Russlands toxische Gesellschaft" (Beyond Putin - Russia's Toxic Society) has just been published.

In her expert opinion (see appendix), Gesine Dornblüth categorises Seipel's films in journalistic terms - in each case against the background of the state of knowledge at the time of publication. She shows whether and which Kremlin narratives Seipel has adopted and where important context is missing. Using Russian-language sources, she has also researched the reputation and journalistic status Seipel enjoyed in Russia and how his publications were used there.

The aim is not to dismiss Seipel's films retrospectively, as that would be cheap. Rather, it is about finding evidence as to whether Mordashov's payments influenced Seipel's films. And it is definitely worth taking a closer look than was perhaps done at the time.

Dornblüth's conclusion: In his films and interviews, Seipel "adopted Putin's positions without critically questioning them, although this would have been possible without any problems". And then they were also used by the Kremlin for "self-reflection". In this respect, Seipel allowed himself to be "abused or utilised" by Putin.

His films served a longing for harmony or normality towards Russia but were not suitable as "part of the required internal plurality of public service broadcasting". This is because they spread "false information through false narratives and distortions of reality".

Of course, this is not proof of any venality. Whether Seipel's ideological closeness to Putin stems from pure conviction, the hope of journalistic scoops or is simply based on money could not be conclusively clarified for this report. Especially as we do not know for sure whether perhaps money was already flowing from Russian sources before 2013.

5. Hubert Seipel - scoop hunter, diva, know-it-all

Seipel is a left-wing journalist with an affinity for Russia who has never made a secret of his position. He already had an impressive filmography before he discovered the topic of Russia for himself. In the middle of the financial crisis, he managed to get the then controversial Deutsche Bank CEO Josef Ackermann for a documentary, he made a film about the first locust infestation of a German company (Grohe), the corruption scandal at VW and German soldiers in Afghanistan ("Live and Die for Kabul"). Seipel was able to attract high-calibre people and catch up with them; in our conversations, he was often compared to the portrait filmmaker Stephan Lamby. To get in touch with his protagonists, he travelled around at events, sought out contacts and wrote handwritten, personal letters.

Around a quarter of his more than 40 TV documentaries have been nominated for important television awards, Seipel emphasises. He has won the Grimme Prize and twice the German Television Prize. The Grimme jury's citation for "Live and Die in Kabul" (2008) reads: "The film has the merit of conveying to the viewer how German soldiers talk about their fears and psychological injuries through his observation with the camera and his careful language [...] In times of controlled, so-called embedded journalism, the author Hubert Seipel succeeds in making an astonishingly independent and informative film that encourages reflection: enlightenment in the best tradition."

As a rule, Seipel did not sell his project ideas to the staff level, the editorial offices, but directly to the bosses: first and foremost to the head of the Culture and Documentary programme department, under whose aegis his films were shown, the programme director, the director-general. He was "a diva", yes, but also "an interesting dialogue

partner", "a clever, headstrong guy", say people who liked to adorn themselves with Seipel. And there were quite a few of them.

They seemed to suppress the other side of the successful filmmaker, which many also talk about. That of the "know-it-all" who perceives criticism as an "insult to his majesty" and suffers from "hubris".

When a planned two-part programme by Seipel was cut down to a 45-minute piece by the editor-in-chief at *ZDF*, Seipel is said to have been quite furious, wrote an angry letter of several pages and referred to his awards. To no avail.

When an *NDR* colleague later wanted to make a report with Seipel for the TV media magazine *Zapp* he is said to have been asked by various people not to question the great author too harshly. The colleague was highly irritated.

Seipel's portrait film "I Putin", in which he shows the Kremlin potentate hunting red deer in Siberia, playing ice hockey, judo and swimming in his home pool, has been repeated 51 times, sold in eleven countries and watched by millions of viewers. In the talk shows, Seipel played the Putin apologist, but he was never a true expert on Russia. He does not speak Russian, he always spoke to Putin in German and his reputation is based solely on his exclusive access to the man in the Kremlin.

6. Seipel and the topic of money

Money obviously played a major role for Hubert Seipel, although colleagues say that he lived modestly until the end, living in his former shared flat on an old, cheap lease and driving a small, rather rickety car. He certainly suffered no financial hardship.

The fees

In this respect, money seemed to have been more of a silent status for Seipel. His fees were mostly well above the normal level of *NDR* - which still seems modest compared to many permanent colleagues in the media industry. Such fees are completely normal for authors of Seipel's calibre, according to *NDR*. The surcharges were justified on the one hand by the exclusivity of the material and interviewees, and on the other hand by the often time-consuming preliminary research.

In the case of the Putin interview from November 2014, the reasoning was as follows: "Since the escalation in Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin has not yet given an interview to any Western journalist from a NATO country - despite numerous interview requests from the West. After Assad and Edward Snowden, Hubert Seipel has once again succeeded in obtaining an exclusive interview with very high attention value for *NDR* (*ARD*). For this scoop, too, the author stubbornly invests a lot of time before signing the

contract. The exclusivity guarantees *NDR* a high level of attention and thus also strengthens the journalistic position of *NDR* and *ARD*."

For the exclusive interview with the US whistleblower Edward Snowden, who fled to Moscow, which was included in the programme in January 2014 under great secrecy (codename "The Guy") and at very short notice, Seipel made a "special agreement" a condition in addition to his higher fee: "Cinecentrum will give the realiser a 50% share of the net proceeds from licence sales actually received by it." An astonishingly generous percentage.

In May 2014 an additional fee was subsequently paid, which was again justified by the exclusivity of the material. Presumably it was also a compensation for the loss of licence revenue. After heavy criticism in the media and online forums, the geo-blocking of the *ARD media library* for the production was lifted and the Snowden interview was made freely available online worldwide - meaning that no more licence sales were to be expected.

For "I, Putin" Seipel received one fee as author and a second as director. The additional 25 per cent share of the proceeds from the film rights was unusual. Normal would have been a so-called buyout, according to the production company, "but Seipel was just good". The amount of the fee was preceded by several weeks of haggling, which went right up to the programme director and apparently pushed the editorial team to the limits of what could be explained.

In the contracts, Seipel reserved the right to make changes to the treatment only with his consent. The two standardised paragraphs, which stipulated that he had to work according to the specifications and wishes of Cinecentrum and *NDR*, were deleted without objection.

The contracts

The press code states: "Anyone who allows themselves to be used for the dissemination or suppression of news acts dishonourably and contrary to their profession."

Seipel concluded an author and realiser contract with the production subsidiary Cinecentrum for each of the individual films. These contracts stipulated that "the journalistic/publishing principles are strictly adhered to in the research and realisation of the production and that the content and/or statements are objectively researched and not wholly or partially fictitious or subjectively influenced".

In the contracts with *NDR*, Cinecentrum assures that "the production will be realised without any extraneous/contractual influence from third parties" and that "no financial

contributions and/or monetary benefits will be granted by third parties in connection with the production or the development of the idea, in particular for the placement of content and topics". And further: "In cases of doubt, the contractual partner shall inform the editorial department immediately in order to clarify the further procedure with the responsible editorial department of *NDR* in good time."

The legal examination revealed that Seipel should probably have disclosed the contractual relationship with Mordashov at least before the project "Putin - The Interview". For two reasons: Firstly, the amount of support could hardly be justified by research costs alone, especially as Seipel still received a fee from his book publisher. Secondly, Mordashov's funds were intended for the same topic as the TV project: Putin. Both these factors "cast serious doubt on Seipel's sufficient independence".

Conversely, this means: If Seipel had made the sponsorship contracts transparent, *NDR* would have had to pull the ripcord on the Putin interview at the latest.

The indignant "No!"

Seipel avoided such a disclosure, however, most recently on 2 June 2021 during a remarkable interview. When he was asked bluntly by presenter Wolfgang Heim on the occasion of his recently published second book on the *SWR1* radio programme "Leute" whether he was on Putin's payroll, Seipel replied ironically: "With at least three million a month."

The presenter follows up: "Have you ever received fees from Russia?"

Seipel, annoyed, initially avoids answering: "Fee from Russia?"

Heim: "Yes. Money."

Seipel: "You mean directly from...?"

Heim: "Okay, whether directly or indirectly..."

Seipel: "Are you still okay? May I give you my answer: Are you still okay?"

Heim insists on an answer: "Okay, so not?"

Seipel: "Are you still okay?"

Heim: "So no?"

Seipel, upset: "The question resonates: Has he been paid?"

Moderator: "So no."

Seipel, now indignant and unequivocal: "No!"

Seipel explains his reaction today as follows: A question as inquisitorial as Heim's clearly implied that Putin had him paid. But he didn't.

In the interviews we conducted everyone credibly affirmed that they neither knew nor even suspected anything about the payments to Seipel. No complaints or information were received by the staff council or the editorial committee of *NDR*. "If Seipel had made

this transparent, his career as a TV journalist would have ended immediately," says one of the people who led him at the time.

Seipel himself says that nobody ever asked him whether he was "travelling on behalf of foreign powers". The idea that the broadcasters would have had to ask him about his motives every time Seipel calls absurd. In fact, asking colleagues about venality is tantamount to a blatant vote of no confidence, especially if there is no evidence of this.

7. How it all began

Getting to know Putin

In a video conversation with the Youtuber *Geopolitics Joe* in front of the Vienna Hofburg in February 2023 Seipel explains how he met Putin. He was working on a film about European gas supply ("Giant Gazprom") when the phone rang in January 2010 shortly before the end of filming and he was asked: "Can you be in Moscow tomorrow?" He got his first interview there. Late in the evening, he played billiards with Putin and was then allowed to spend the night in his residence, as Seipel reported years ago.

After the interview with Putin, he had to rework the entire film dramaturgically in various night shifts. But because the appointment with Putin had gone so well, Seipel says he came up with the idea of "making a larger film portrait of this powerful and controversial politician". This became "I, Putin", the documentary that established his reputation as an expert on the Kremlin.

With a little help from friends

According to Seipel, he initially ran up against a brick wall when initiating "I, Putin" and was repeatedly put off by his first letters. Until he met someone who in turn knew Putin and helped him to get a commitment two years later. At the beginning of April 2011, Putin granted him an appointment in Moscow at short notice. The meeting, which was also attended by government spokesman Dmitry Peskov and an interpreter, took place in German and lasted a good hour. Afterwards Putin promised.

Seipel has not yet revealed who this "door opener" was. This person, who is said to have helped behind the scenes, could have been the former SPD politician and Russian honorary consul Heino Wiese, who now works as a business and political consultant. Matthias Warnig, former major of the Ministry of State Security of the GDR, ex-banker in Russia and then CEO of the German-Russian gas pipeline consortium Nordstream, could also be involved. Warnig is considered a close confidant of Putin, the two have known each other since the 1990s. Warnig has been sanctioned by the USA on several occasions due to his closeness to Russia.

It is certain that Seipel had contact with Warnig. In an email dated the end of August 2011 with the subject line "Our friend" Seipel thanks Warnig for the lovely evening and then gets straight to the point. What he needs for a credible film: In addition to historical clips, above all close-up scenes - in a car, airplane or helicopter, at a cabinet meeting, a social event, at sport. "To be authentic and convincing, we have to get up close and personal." To increase credibility, Seipel would like to interview former oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky himself. "If our friend or you still have one or two close political associates in mind, let me know. I have thought of Chubai, Miller and also Hermann Gref." Seipel concludes his email by announcing that he will be flying to Moscow the following week and that it would be good if he could get to know Peskov. He had already met him in April.

His wishes were then largely fulfilled. The extent to which Warnig opened doors for him can only be surmised. Whether Warnig or Wiese, who both belong to former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's network, knew about the sponsorship contracts and whether one of them even had the idea for them could not be clarified. Both left questions from us unanswered.

8. Can books and films be viewed separately?

Seipel's admission that the sponsorship contracts from 2013 onwards were intended solely as research support for the books and did not affect his films sounds rather academic. Because even from his point of view the books and films were to be regarded as parts of a complete work, as Seipel explained in an interview with a portal close to the Kremlin. There he answered the question of whether the book was a continuation of the film:

"The film and the book are one project. The book was not just the sequel, but the development of the film." The book was written over three years, from 2012 to 2015 he accompanied Putin every three months as he travelled through the country.

Why he accepted the money Seipel today explains as follows: In the course of his research, he quickly realised that the books could not be written on the side and that no German think tank would support his approach. He invested a total of eight years of work in his book projects, travelling to Russia around 50 times, plus research in the USA, at the Minsk2 negotiations and the Helsinki meetings. The book publisher could not afford the enormous amount of time and scope of such a research. The offer from Mordashov, who, according to Seipel, had noticed how the political situation was changing, fell into this mixed situation.

Does he regret taking the money? "No. Without third-party funding, i.e. sponsorship, I wouldn't have been able to write the books." Especially as his independence had been

contractually secured. What has changed, he says, is the political climate and public opinion, which now only makes judgements in the categories of good or evil.

9. The production of "I, Putin"

Expensive, complex and sometimes chaotic

The fact that the production was handled by Cinecentrum was due to the circumstance that Seipel's films represented a real organisational challenge and were almost impossible for the editorial team to handle as in-house productions. Technology, travel, visa applications - Cinecentrum took care of everything for "I, Putin".

The documentary was designed for four filming trips and was considered expensive, but appropriate for the exclusivity of the material. The files show that meticulous attention was paid to money so as not to exceed the budget. All authorisation channels were followed, an editing list was drawn up, and an editorial release exists for the few untraceable editing images from third-party material. The visas for the film crew were issued remarkably quickly. The consul was supposed to have said: "Come round, you'll get your visas," recalls one of the people involved. Otherwise it was a normal production, "without anything unusual".

If you ignore the sometimes chaotic conditions on site: The desired technology had to be entirely imported to Russia, it was not even available in the capital. The first interview with Putin took place after seven hours of waiting, well after midnight. Putin liked to change the time and place of his appearances at short notice, so that there was a lack of people and equipment.

Seipel worked on location with a crew he had never met before. Cinecentrum had recommended the cameraman and sound recordist to him, the cutter was an idea of the editorial team, so it was not a close-knit community that produced the portrait.

International claim

"I, Putin" was "designed for international TV exploitation from the outset", as can be seen from the exploitation concept for the documentary. In addition, "a screening at the Berlinale 2012 was planned" as well as a submission to the major international festivals. "Due to the exclusivity of this production and the presidential elections taking place in Russia in 2012, we are firmly convinced that the production will be of great international interest."

In the draft of the "exposé-like paper" for "I, Putin" from April 2011, Seipel still intends to interview "friend" and "foe". It then became mainly friends.

10. Was Seipel already receiving money from Russia at that time?

Seipel claims no: He "never received any money from third parties for films or television interviews". But how credible is this statement from someone who, despite being asked several times in a radio interview in 2021, didn't take it precisely with the truth?

Some of those who were on site with him believe it is quite impossible that Seipel was already being paid from Russian sources at the start of the filming of "I, Putin". They rather suspect that the film was the ultimate vote of confidence and laid the foundation for more.

At the beginning of filming Seipel was still quite unsure about what he could and could not get away with. A memo shows how surprised Putin's press staff was that the Germans should have backstage access at all: "Putin's apparatus first had to learn that we are not a simple news team but work with elaborate and extensive technology. The stuff in 14 suitcases has to be transported."

During the first days of filming in October 2011, Seipel's team swam more badly than well in the Russian TV crowd, "without even getting a halfway usable picture", according to one of those involved. Seipel claims that he had two real run-ins with the Kremlin press coordinator. That all changed abruptly on 14 October 2011. After an exhausting, frustrating day of filming, the team had returned to the hotel when Seipel suddenly received a call summoning him to an ice rink on Kutuzov Prospekt. Putin was training there late in the evening with the coach of the Russian national ice hockey team. Seipel was slightly overwhelmed by the situation, recalls one of the people involved, and his cameraman then took matters into his own hands.

The close relationship with Kremlin spokesman Peskov is also said to have only emerged in the course of 2011. At the time Peskov apparently also had a request from the *BBC*, which he is said to have favoured. It was Putin who is said to have decided in favour of Seipel. The *BBC* research led to the four-part programme "Putin, Russia and the West" and, like "I, Putin", was also broadcast on the pro-Kremlin channel *NTW*.

11. Bribery through proximity?

The first reviews

"I, Putin" already triggered a discussion in the media about the acceptable level of closeness. Seipel was allowed to accompany Putin on a hunting trip to Siberia, he travelled with him in his limousine through Moscow at night, was allowed to film him doing judo, showed him exhausted and sweaty playing ice hockey and doing his laps in

the swimming pool, where his dog licked his face afterwards. Even Russian court reporters were amazed at how close Putin let the German get to him: "We've never seen him like this", one was quoted saying. The film's voiceover glorifies Putin towards the end as a doer and cleaner on behalf of the ordinary people.

"Strangely enough, opponents didn't get a chance to speak, they would certainly have disturbed the setting...", *SPIEGEL Online* then mocked. Critics accused Seipel of having allowed himself buying the edge in return for this closeness. The author chalks it up to colleague envy and points to the many positive reviews:

"The multi-award-winning Seipel explains his working method as follows: 'Proximity always burns, but if you really want to learn something from someone, you have to get close and then distance yourself again. An approach that has earned Seipel the expected suspicion of propaganda, but which his film disproves.'" (*taz*)

"Grimme Award winner Seipel asks Putin all the necessary - because unpleasant - questions about Chechnya and the opposition, but he still gives his protagonist enough space to stage himself. This results in the film's strongest scenes." (*SZ*)

"The TV man gets very close to the prime minister, who wants to become president again, without falling for his tricks. He succeeds in breaking through the staging that his counterpart may have had in mind." (*DER SPIEGEL*)

"Hubert Seipel refrains from demonising the "Putin system" and in return reaps a politically and psychologically convincing portrait of the man who will probably be the next Russian president." (*FAZ*)

The Putin interview

Seipel's close relationship with Putin led to an exclusive interview with the Russian president in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of Donbass. It was shown as part of the programme *Günther Jauch* and then discussed by the talk show guests. The interview met with a much more divided response than the portrait film two and a half years earlier. While *Stern*, *FAZ* and *Handelsblatt* ("Star hour in Channel One") praised Seipel for giving Putin space for his answers and narrative methodology, viewers condemned the interview on Twitter as the "most submissive programme" of the year.

The critics then took Seipel to task: *SZ* spoke of "court reporting", *Welt* of "Kremlin TV". The Moscow correspondent for *Focus* was the harshest. Boris Reitschuster was quoted as follows in the *NDR* magazine *Zapp*, which used Seipel's Putin interview as an opportunity for a piece: "I was horrified, I have to say quite honestly. For me, it wasn't an interview.

For me, it was the monologue of a dictator with a cue." Reitschuster complained that Putin was misleading the audience "because he is allowed to lie unchallenged".

Seipel countered: "I knew I would get a beating." That was unpleasant, but unavoidable in such a narcissistic industry. His calculation: As tough confrontation in his opinion usually leads to relatively little, he deliberately let Putin talk: "The longer people talk openly about themselves [...] the more they talk about things they don't want to talk about," Seipel told *Zapp*. The viewers shouldn't be seen as stupid, they could certainly judge for themselves what is propaganda and what is not.

In response to the accusation that he had lost the necessary journalistic distance to Putin, Seipel conceded that "closeness may make you biased" but made it clear for him that such an interview would not work without getting close to the person. The decisive factor would be where this closeness ends: "Journalists instrumentalise politicians and politicians instrumentalise journalists. That's just the business."

Years later, he told the Youtuber in Vienna that you of course have to know "where the boundaries are".

The Oscar-winning US director Oliver Stone, who released the four-part film "The Putin Interviews" in 2017, already failed to do so. According to the *SZ*, Stone's interviews, which were conducted over many years, clearly show that it is impossible to talk to Putin normally, as the power imbalance is too "palpable".

Putin's close companion

In an interview with *Zeit* in May 2014 Seipel explained that he had been admitted to the pool of Kremlin journalists and was the only Western journalist allowed to travel with Putin, "for example to China, through Russia, to Sochi". It was astonishing how openly Putin told him "about his childhood experiences, the callousness of his parents, his life in the backyard of St. Petersburg".

Seipel claims to have met Putin "almost 100 times". He told *Hannoversche Allgemeine* in October 2015, on the occasion of the publication of his first book, that the work was a summary of the last three years. He had seen Putin every ten or twelve weeks, had even travelled with him to the Pope, had often spent hours talking to him at night. So it comes as no surprise that Seipel was one of the hand-picked guests at Putin's inauguration in 2012.

When Seipel presented the Russian edition of "Putin. Innenansichten der Macht" in Moscow in 2016 Putin himself appeared and signed a copy for the German with great publicity. "The Kremlin celebrates Seipel" commented the *FAZ*. The first sponsorship deal had long since been finalised. But even without this knowledge, the joint appearance at

this time (Crimea occupied by Russia, the MH17 passenger plane shot down by Russia) was borderline in the opinion of many.

At public events Seipel appeared regularly, sometimes with, sometimes without a cameraman. One correspondent reports how Seipel suddenly emerged from the "inner circle area" during Chancellor Angela Merkel's visit to Sochi in 2018. When Olaf Scholz made his inaugural visit to Moscow in mid-February 2022 to prevent Putin from escalating the situation in Ukraine Seipel sat in the front row at the following press conference.

12. Did the Kremlin help with Scoops?

When a year after "I, Putin" Seipel interviewed Syria's ruler Bashar al Assad alongside Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov for his film "The Syria Trap", almost everyone in the editorial office in Hamburg assumed that the author had his good connections in the Kremlin to thank for this. And a year later, when Seipel was able to interview Edward Snowden, who had fled to Moscow, as the first Western television journalist, many again believed that the Kremlin had a hand in it. In both cases, the scoops were gratefully accepted.

At least in the case of Snowden the "release" was most probably carried out via his lawyers in the USA. Seipel had travelled to them in New York before the interview, report those involved. According to Seipel it can be assumed that Moscow then knew about his contacts with Snowden. He points out that he was perfectly capable of making contact without the Kremlin. During his research into the eavesdropping activities of the US intelligence agency NSA ("Abgehört und abgenickt") he had four former BND presidents and former NSA and CIA Chief Michael Hayden exclusively in front of the camera.

13. Was NDR too naive?

In the frenzy of scoops

Despite the conspicuous glorification of Putin as misunderstood by the West, there were no discussions about Seipel's films at *NDR* at the time. Nobody complained that they were "too positive or too uncritical", say those involved; the Putin-balanced approach was categorised as the desired plurality of opinion. And so the makers still stand behind the portrait "I, Putin". Only one of them says: "From today's perspective, the film is just embarrassing." But the "fascination of the images", this closeness that Putin had never allowed before, outshone everything. Doubts were then pushed aside because the images were real.

The Austrian broadcaster *Servus TV*, which co-financed a small part of "I, Putin", was also full of praise after the broadcast and expressed its thanks for "this beautiful film". The 75-minute film was "really absolutely unique". Yes, the film had caused some controversial discussions in the house as to whether Putin had been portrayed too harmlessly or whether this was precisely the appeal of the portrait. They apparently agreed on the latter - and made a similar enquiry to the Chancellery in Vienna. The email concluded with the words that they would be happy to be "on board for such demanding missions" in the future.

After "I, Putin" a real Seipel enthusiasm spread through all hierarchies at *NDR*, report colleagues. As soon as the author brought in new, exclusive material, everyone got very excited. With Seipel behind him, it was possible to make a career, as he delivered "not the regular, but the special". Pride in such fabrics was greater than caution. Seipel was treated like a superstar, nobody questioned whether he might have lost the necessary distance.

Hidden criticism of Putin

Of course, if you look closely, you will also find some criticisms of the Kremlin in Seipel's films. But they are subtle. As beautifully as the autocrat is allowed to stage himself in "I, Putin" he is sometimes exposed in the process: during the party conference staging, the camera pans across the stands and lingers on a fan who has fallen asleep from the euphoria. In one ice hockey scene Putin falls awkwardly onto the ice, in another he puts his helmet on the wrong way round. Practicing judo, he first throws down rows of opponents only to be put on his back by a judoka. "If Seipel had wanted to be beautiful, or if the Kremlin had had a hand in it, he wouldn't have been allowed to show all that," says a colleague.

The freedom of the great authors

With Seipel you had to wrestle about his films, sometimes for every word. But the authors set the direction, the narrative for their documentaries, and Seipel did not like to be talked into it. The editors certainly didn't see it as their job to impose their own opinions on an experienced and award-winning author like Seipel.

How much editorial influence is appropriate, where does it become unruly? Seipel enjoyed a great deal of freedom in this respect. Before his Putin interview, which was broadcast in prime time on *Jauch* on a Sunday, he did not discuss the questions with anyone. Only his cutter claims to have seen them beforehand. Of the five names listed in the credits of "I, Putin" under "Editorial team", only two were actively involved in the production. The rest are only mentioned because their institutions co-financed the film. Even the exuberant colleague from *Servus TV* was neither in Hamburg to view the material nor did he take part in the final approval.

The Bolshoi scene

Some things in "I, Putin" may pass as a matter of taste, one scene does not: The parallel montage in which the reopening gala of Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre is cut against Putin's ice hockey training. The superimposed stadium clock suggests that Putin has little interest in high society and its glamour (narrator: "Cultural high masses of this kind are alien to him"), preferring instead to improve his hitting technique in a tough men's sport. And it's true: Putin was absent from the Bolshoi Gala on 28 October 2011, but the footage from the ice hockey rink dates from 14 October. There is no evidence in the production documents that Putin was at the ice hockey training session on 28 October 2011.

However, a translation detail shows that meticulous work was also done in the film. After the ice hockey match between the "Bears" (Medvedev's team) and the "Tigers" (Putin's team) Putin suggests inviting the victorious opposing team for a beer. There is a long discussion with translators as to whether "Medvedev's team" can be heard from the indistinct audio recording or the somewhat more casual phrase "Bears' team", both sound almost identical.

Dealing with external material

A *Zapp* article from December 2023 accuses *NDR* of not being transparent enough with the third-party film material used in "I, Putin". State PR material and sequences from the state broadcaster *RT* were used in various places. In the end credits, however, there is only a reference to *RT Free Video*, not to the material from Kremlin spokesperson Peskov. So-called inserts were also missing.

In fact, according to the *NDR* editing list, Seipel used Kremlin material. An email from early January 2012 states that he brought 10 tapes of Russian government TV from Moscow. These include, for example, the photos from his childhood. There was a short-written statement from Peskov for the transfer of rights to state "video and photo footage". Everything could be used free of charge. However, it was not Seipel who negotiated the free transfer, it was Cinecentrum.

The editorial team explains that the use of third-party film material is common in the industry, and that even the *Tagesschau* uses such material without always specifying this in detail. And indeed: In the clearly more critical documentary "Putin's Russia" for example even secret service footage is used, and only this is briefly flagged up once via inserts. Of course, the reference to the Kremlin as a source should still have been included in the end credits of "I, Putin". Conversely, this omission cannot be used to derive Kremlin influence.

What is more important for us: The scenes that create the special closeness in "I, Putin", such as the swimming pool or the ice hockey scene, are filmed by Seipel's team themselves and do not come from Kremlin sources.

Dealing with expenses

Accompanying the Russian Prime Minister was a logistical challenge for the film crew. Constant rescheduling, interviews that did not take place or suddenly took place somewhere else, complex security precautions, travelling at short notice: The documents and conversations show that the team flew with Putin several times, sometimes in a Gazprom airplane, sometimes in a Kremlin helicopter, was invited to dinner by him several times and stayed overnight in Kremlin accommodation several times. The Russian state did not charge him for this and Cinecentrum did not claim any invoices. "Every production is happy when no costs are incurred," says a former Cinecentrum employee. Everything that could be planned in terms of travelling and overnight stays was included and paid for, says another; Seipel's spontaneous trips were not included. It would have been complicated and unusual to calculate the film crew's share each time. Moreover, *NDR* would "almost certainly not have accepted" such a contribution to costs.

Seipel explains: Having to ask the Kremlin kitchen for a bill is "unworldly". During the filming in Siberia and the overnight stays at military bases the security service took over the organisation. "Sometimes we didn't even know exactly where we were flying to."

According to today's compliance standards, such an accumulation of invitations would no longer be acceptable, would either have to demand a cost contribution (even if it would not be the "real share" in the case of a helicopter flight) or sometimes an invitation would have to be waived. In any case, the editorial team must be consulted beforehand.

In 2011, compliance was still a foreign concept for many journalists and awareness of it was rather underdeveloped. In the case of "I, Putin", there was also the fact that such cost reimbursements would have exceeded the budget.

14. Did the *WDR* warn the *NDR*?

The annoyance of WDR

Following the revelation of Seipel's sponsorship contracts, some media reported that it would not have had to come to this if *NDR* had only listened to its sister broadcaster *WDR* and its warnings. At *ARD*, the correspondent's office in Moscow is under the control of *WDR* in Cologne. It is not forbidden for *NDR* to make a film portrait of the Russian prime minister who wants to become president for a second time with a freelance author. However, regarding the fact that *WDR* is responsible for Russia and had a highly respected correspondent on location at the time, one would assume that colleagues

would consult with each other before embarking on such a project. Especially as Seipel was dependent on archive material from the studio and there had already been a dispute about this years before with his film "Giant Gazprom". After that, *WDR* "released" him from topics related to Russia, as the story goes.

Nevertheless (or perhaps precisely because of this), according to reports, emails and phone calls from those involved, things went differently than perhaps expected:

Mid-April 2011

NDR calls the Moscow office to say that they have been promised exclusive interviews with Putin and want to produce a documentary portrait film. Hubert Seipel should have already discussed this with the studio.

The correspondent feels caught cold, never heard anything about an interview request to Putin. Seipel did not inform the studio. The correspondent is angry, Moscow is *WDR* territory, so they expect to be informed, or even better, involved. The studio refuses to co-operate. Shortly afterwards, the bosses in Cologne are informed.

The person responsible for German media in the Russian Foreign Ministry asks informally in the Moscow studio whether an *ARD correspondent* named Seinel or Seipel is known and why the visa was not applied for via the studio as usual? The process had been pushed into him "from the very top". The superiors in Cologne and the *NDR* get also informed about this.

End of April 2011

Almost two weeks later Seipel writes an email to the *WDR* editor and explains how the "Putin project" came about, that he is "not planning a hagiography" and not a story that can be developed from day-to-day business. "It will take time and nerves." The reason he offered this story to *NDR* was because he had changed his working life after a stay in hospital and only wanted to edit and finish his films in Hamburg. *NDR* was as empathetic as helpful during this phase.

The *WDR* editor insists on adherence to the rules of the game and a minimum obligation to provide information. In addition, this kind of "hand picking" in the selection of authors by Putin gives the impression that "an unwelcome studio should be deliberately bypassed". *WDR* offers Seipel a co-operation, but only if it is really a joint effort, including an interview with Putin conducted by two people.

Seipel gets caught up in the borderline conflict between two large *ARD* organisations that are in strong competition with each other. Experienced colleagues may find such friction normal, but Seipel does not, he reacts angrily: the *WDR* email "astonished and

overwhelmed" him, he replies, he learns more about *ARD's* internal rules than he ever wanted to. The suspicion that Putin had chosen him in order to circumvent journalistic standards was "character assassination", which he opposes. And the expectation that he would inform the Moscow studio if Putin invited him for an interview was absurd. That set the tone.

When asked today, Seipel added as an explanation for the dispute: *WDR* had tried unsuccessfully for years to get a Putin portrait. It was of course painful that he succeeded in doing this for *NDR*.

Beginning of June 2011

The heads of *WDR* and *NDR* sort out their positions on the Seipel project, with the result that there will be no joint film. *WDR* insists on co-authorship, *NDR* is only prepared to leave the editing of the film to *WDR*. The reason: Putin will make the film exclusively with Seipel as author. And Seipel says that he works alone as an author as a matter of principle.

WDR finds it "remarkable" that autocrats are allowed to choose their interview partners. *NDR* finds it "understandable" that an author would not want to share such a scoop. In any case, the *WDR* refuses to edit the project - either co-authorship or nothing at all. For this reason, the project is now going to the editors-in-chief conference (CRK), with an open outcome, according to an email exchange. However, according to *NDR*, Seipel has already threatened that *ZDF* would be interested in the film if it does not get through to *ARD*.

A "typical argument of urgency in *ARD*", as one person says. And the *ZDF* studio in Moscow also considers this threat to be a pretence. Seipel has not worked for *ZDF* since he felt mistreated by a hierarch of the broadcaster in 2008 during the approval of a portrait documentary about Joschka Fischer.

End of September 2011

After months of silence, *NDR* contacted *WDR* in Moscow again with the surprising news that the studio did not have to provide any assistance with visas etc. or take care of anything. Everything is on track - the Putin film will be registered by *NDR* for the first quarter of 2012 and "will also get through the CRK." The studio informs its executives in Cologne.

It is no longer possible to reconstruct how Seipel's film got through the editors-in-chief conference, whether there were concerns or dissenting voices and who questioned what. According to a *Correctiv* article from 24.11.2023 Sigmund Gottlieb, editor-in-chief of *Bayerischer Rundfunk* at the time, is said to have asked his *NDR* colleagues in a

broadcast whether they were not entering into "a pact with the devil" with "I, Putin". It remains unclear exactly when and where he issued this warning. According to the CRK transcript from mid-November 2011, the panel accepts the film without comment. Gottlieb, who took part in this CRK at least some of the time, was not available for a personal interview. He only let us know that he did not remember anything more than what already was said.

Mid-October 2011

The pro-government Russian newspaper *Izvestia* publishes a positive article about the planned Seipel film, along the lines of: Germany is giving Putin a film. From the point of view of the Moscow studio, the text reads as if it had been "ordered". When *Izvestia* asked whether the Kremlin press service was restricting Seipel's reporting in any way, he replied briskly: "Let them try."

20 October 2011

It is clear to *WDR* that the Seipel film can no longer be stopped. The management in Cologne wants to keep the studio in Moscow out of it and make its own documentary instead. They need a recognisable counterweight in terms of content to a possibly very pleasing Putin film. This would then be registered and broadcast in a package with Seipel's portrait. The studio, which is actually still working on another documentary, is asked for a quick concept. The result: a film in which the Russian opposition and civil society have their say, which deals with repression and the protests against the double casting between Putin and Medvedev.

The PR mail from Brussels

7 February 2012

On the same day, *ARD*'s Moscow studio receives a curious email from the Brussels PR agency GPlus. The sender expresses an interest in distributing the Putin documentary as widely as possible. The agency knows that the film was produced for *ARD* and is due to be broadcast on 27 February. Interestingly, what it does not know is that the film is being produced on behalf of *NDR*. The decisive sentence from the Moscow studio's point of view, because it is supposedly revealing, is the following: "To be completely honest: Our clients seem to be satisfied with the result (although it is not clear to me whether they have seen the final product) and would like to promote it in Germany but also beyond Germany."

The PR professionals from GPlus were working for Gazprom and the Russian government at the time. They were tasked with making the Kremlin look good in Europe. This is not offensive at first; numerous companies and ministries, including in Germany, work with PR agencies. What is irritating is the supposed satisfaction of the client. Did the Kremlin already know about the film?

"I wouldn't rule that out," the PR consultant who wrote the email is quoted as saying in the *Correktiv* article. He told us that he had probably expressed himself "misleadingly" at the time: He had only heard from his clients that the film existed and that its distribution was considered good. He had not seen the film himself at the time and did not remember his clients saying anything to that effect. That sounds credible since the film was not even finished at the time.

The Moscow studio refers GPlus to *NDR* and forwards the email not only to Cologne, but also directly to the *NDR* editorial team, with a brief explanation of who GPlus is. An explicit warning is not associated with this forwarding. In Hamburg, no further significance is attached to the GPlus email. It is not understood as a warning but rather as a topic for "sales". GPlus will be informed that the film is far from finished - and referred to the responsible department, *NDR* writes back to Studio Moscow. The first images were only shown today: "I'm really impressed because it provides unusual insights. But it will still be a lot of work."

9 February 2012

GPlus follows up again in a second email, this time to Studio Hamburg. Again with the request to place the film as widely as possible, preferably in English-language media and with broadcasters in France and Italy. After all, it is "an extraordinary document that largely consists of conversations with Mr Putin himself", which is something of a rarity. GPlus is offering to organise panel discussions with journalists to promote the documentary, at which excerpts from the documentary will be shown, as well as a few interviews with Seipel.

The email ends with a request for assistance: "Could you perhaps help us get in touch with Mr Seipel (we have his contact details, but have not yet managed to reach him)?" Studio Hamburg forwards this email to Cinecentrum on the same day. It does not receive much attention either.

"I, Putin" on NTW

On 25 February it is announced that Gazprom broadcaster NTW intends to broadcast the Seipel film in prime time on 2 March, two days before the presidential election. In other words, on the last day on which political agitation is still permitted. Kremlin spokesman Peskov himself is said to have chosen the channel and date. Apparently, the Kremlin considers the film to be "image-promoting", according to great unease at WDR. The large number of private images is in no way inferior to Putin's self-staging on Russian television. "Self-staging that we have always reported on critically. And which we are now generating ourselves", criticises WDR.

When *WDR* asked *NDR* whether *NTW* had actually acquired the rights to "Ich, Putin", they initially said they knew nothing about it. This is also because it is not the broadcaster itself but the production company or marketing subsidiary that is responsible for this. They would have to clarify this themselves. Such rights sales are common in order to recoup some of the high production costs.

While *WDR* sees the film as a "catastrophe" for its Moscow studio, *ARD's* programme decision-makers take a much more sober view of the portrait: "The concern that the film will be branded in the West as an uncritical work of favouritism towards Putin" is less likely after what they have seen.

Exchange at director level

27 February 2012

The *NDR* director received a fax from the *WDR* directorate asking him to prevent the broadcast of "I, Putin" on *NTW* two days before the election. There was a "risk that a glossy *ARD* production could become an instrument in the Russian election campaign in an alarming way" - because it would be "perceived as an election aid" for Putin. This threatens to damage *ARD's* reputation "in Russia".

28 February 2012

One day later, the *NDR* director replied that the broadcast could no longer be prevented due to the contracts that had been concluded. Moreover, he did not share the concern that the film could be perceived as "election campaign aid". The Berlin *NTW* representative had rated the portrait (45' version) as "tough" at the preview. Incidentally, *NDR* had been prepared to hand over the lead management of the project to *WDR* after the initial irritations, "but in vain". The Director General welcomes the fact that the *WDR* documentary "Götterdämmerung im Kreml?" was subsequently broadcast. This programme proves that *ARD* is perfectly capable of juxtaposing different journalistic viewpoints.

Postscript

1 March 2012

Seipel contacts Studio Moscow by email. He seems satisfied with the double pack. However, he doesn't need to have the unpleasant skirmishes and rearguard action again.

2 March 2012

On the day of the planned evening broadcast, *NTW* surprisingly removes the Seipel film from the programme. Allegedly because of protests from the opposition and the election committee who considered the broadcast date two days before the election to be unfair, the broadcaster claims. Is that true? The election commission was considered to be close to Putin. On the other hand, despite all the authoritarian rigour and repression, Putin was

still pursuing a legalistic approach at the time in order to be perceived externally as an elected democrat.

Or was the film too critical for the Kremlin in the end, as some at *NDR* suspect? If so, it would probably not only have been postponed, but cancelled altogether.

7 May 2012

NTW shows the film of Putin's inauguration. The day before, there had been protests against electoral fraud and against Putin on Bolotnaya Square, with hundreds of arrests, some of them brutal. These were the last major protests that Moscow has seen.

15. Did Seipel present the film to the Kremlin beforehand?

During the finalisation phase of "I, Putin", Seipel received copies from his editor almost every day in order to add text to them. To this day, however, he maintains that he never submitted anything before the film was broadcast. There was no influence on the content beyond the "usual" ("as is usual in Berlin, for example") level. Especially as Putin had assured him that he did not want to see the film beforehand. Peskov confirmed this again in an interview. According to Seipel, there was only one agreement with Putin: "Nothing about his current relations."

So where does the customer's satisfaction come from?

It cannot be ruled out that it resulted from the atmosphere during filming. In the *Zapp* piece from December 2023, Ilhan Coskun, who was responsible for the sound and also operated the second camera if necessary, surmises: "It was a friendship between Seipel and Putin." Does the Russian autocrat make friends with a German journalist just like that? It certainly seemed to have felt that way.

It is also possible that the Kremlin knew what to expect from Putin's numerous conversations with Seipel. In the second email from GPlus, the "extraordinary" film document is justified precisely on this basis. In addition, the Kremlin had already had experience with Seipel at "Giant Gazprom". And they weren't bad. Together, this could have fuelled positive expectations.

However, a cyber-attack on Studio Hamburg, which was suspected in the meantime and in which Russian hackers could have obtained the material, can be ruled out. During production, the mouse on a colleague's computer was suddenly controlled as if by magic and a string of characters appeared: the local administrator passwords. The computer was immediately taken offline - and a forensic expert was called in. He came to the conclusion that it was not an external attack, but that an IT employee had accessed the computer without authorisation as part of a larger data transfer - and then tried to cover it up.

The chance of being able to make a valid judgement about the film at the time of the GPlus email was slim anyway. The documentary was only finished two and a half weeks later, at the last minute. The finished mix was available on Saturday 25 February at 00:03, shortly before the broadcast date on 27 February. The tape was only transferred to NTW on 26 February.

The trailer could not have been the decisive factor for the customer's satisfaction at the time of the GPlus email either. As the rights to "I, Putin" had been sold to various foreign broadcasters, a trailer had to be created to support distribution. In an email from NTW's Berlin office manager to Studio Hamburg, dated early February, he called for a "third cosmic speed" in order to meet the time frame for the rights sale: In order to be able to sign the contract by 15 February, Moscow would have to have it next week, i.e. in the week starting Monday 6 February. The trailer is also due then. "I'm sorry, but those are our laws."

In an email dated 9 February, Studio Hamburg urged both Seipel and Cinecentrum to speed up the dispatch of the voiceover text and the broadcast material, otherwise the NTW broadcast date in Russia could not be met. Once again, a trailer was requested.

Seipel replied curtly that his film would not be ready before 25 February, period. Later, Cinecentrum at least promised a 6-minute trailer for 20 February. It is no longer clear whether this was actually sent out, none of those involved can remember, NTW failed to reply.

The story of the bought home story

In the meantime, the suspicion that Seipel had had the film approved by the Kremlin was substantiated by the story of an "immoral offer" (*Bild*), which made the rounds in mid-November 2023. Ex-Moscow correspondent and WDR man Udo Lielischkies told *Bild* that he and his station had already been offered a home story with Putin and Schröder in 2004/05, but it had quickly become clear "that Gazprom and the Kremlin wanted control of the material and the finished film". Lielischkies continues: "We turned it down. Seipel obviously didn't." He criticised via *Bild*: "*NDR* succumbed to the temptation to get close to the fascinating Russian president. Who gets a home story with Putin?" *NDR* had "obviously overlooked the fact that the price is uncriticism".

So is Seipel's "Giant Gazprom" the dirty deal that WDR didn't want to get involved in with the home story?

The fact is: In 2004/2005, Lielischkies is said to have met with a Kremlin PR negotiator in Cologne; Lielischkies can still remember that it took place in a pizzeria near the

cathedral. At this meeting, *WDR* is said to have been offered the home story in question, with the unambiguous remark that the Kremlin wanted to have a say before it was broadcast. The person in charge of *WDR*, who is said to have been present at the dinner, cannot remember such an offer, at least no notes were found. The offer was also not pursued at *WDR*. "The proposal must have been so absurd that we cancelled it immediately," says the *WDR* executive.

It is doubtful that this offer resulted in "Giant Gazprom" three to four years later. The film is not a home story; moreover, it was supervised by *WDR* itself, which still stands by the film today. The documentary was editorially scrutinised by two very experienced colleagues, *WDR* emphasises.

This means: Although *WDR* denied Seipel both the expertise and the necessary distance to Putin and the Kremlin, he was hired for "Giant Gazprom". And later was also invited to talk shows (for which *WDR* was responsible). Most recently, at the end of January 2022, he was allowed to explain to an audience of millions on *Maischberger* that Nato had "surrounded" Putin. He was outraged by the "hysteria" caused by Putin's supposedly imminent attack and predicted that he would not risk a war. According to an analysis, Seipel was one of the top ten guests for Russia talk shows on public German TV between December 2013 (shortly before the first war) and February 2022.

WDR also had no indication that Seipel was being paid from Russian sources. One executive says: "Otherwise we would have warned *NDR* in a completely different way!"

16. There can only be one

The interviews with Jauch

What Seipel's critics repeatedly criticised were his airs and graces. One person in particular felt the brunt of this: Günther Jauch. Exclusive Seipel interviews (Snowden and Putin) were broadcast and discussed twice as part of his Sunday evening talk, both times leading to considerable anger.

During the *Jauch* programme on Snowden the process was "incredibly cumbersome", recalls one participant. Jauch had to prepare a show without really having a say in which interview sequences from Snowden were played. When Seipel boarded the train from Hamburg to Berlin to travel to the show, the interview had not even been edited yet. And Seipel alone decided which parts of the Snowden interview to release for the *Jauch* talk. He was extremely self-righteous, says someone who was attending the show in Berlin.

For someone like Jauch, who reacted sensitively to any kind of interference, this was difficult to bear. Normally, his editors put together the programme themselves. His slot, his quota, his responsibility.

Seipel did not like to take such customs into consideration. His scoop, his rules. And that's why his Putin interview went the same way months later. Once again, Jauch had to present blind. Nobody knew what questions Seipel had asked the Russian president, nobody was supposed to see the interview beforehand. The talk show guests, including Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen, also felt "like chickens on a roost" because they had absolutely no idea what to expect, according to one participant. The Culture and Documentation department had acted in Seipel's interests and did not provide the panel with interview excerpts beforehand. On the other hand, there had been time for the corresponding press releases, which had been sent out on time.

According to one critic, the Putin interview simply went live with virtually no security or control mechanisms; there was not even a sworn translation. The *NDR* had allowed itself to be driven by Seipel. Nevertheless, they were proud. In the end, the documentary department even reserved a place for its own names in the credits of the *Jauch* show. Jauch probably only accepted this because he could prove that he bore no responsibility for the interview.

Seipel's bitterness

Seipel became increasingly thin-skinned in the wake of the harsh criticism following the Putin interview - even though excerpts of his Putin books were published by *SPIEGEL* and *ZEIT*. In 2015, at a lecture in Switzerland, he said that he was sometimes vilified as a "KGB agent" and sometimes as a "Putin-smoocher". He then came down hard on the "moral canonisers" in the editorial offices. The analysis of foreign policy had sunk to "Facebook level" - "'like' or 'don't like'", he wrote in a guest article back in 2014. Anyone who avoids Putin bashing is seen as "unprincipled and without backbone [...] Possibly paid by the Kremlin, just like Gerhard Schröder."

Over the years, this bitterness turned into an almost radical know-it-all attitude. The harsher the criticism of him and in particular his second book became, the more he felt like the only sighted person among the blind. On the anniversary of Putin's invasion of Ukraine, Seipel accused all those who were outraged of "moral PR". Every day there is a "flood of emotionalisation". He compared Kremlin critical journalists in their "moral superiority" with the "militant Islamists of IS". To a former colleague he met by chance on the street in spring 2023 he hurriedly shouted that he had to go to Ukraine in the next few days and finally show what things were really like there.

17. Once Team Seipel, always Team Seipel?

At the latest when Seipel presented his first book in Moscow together with Putin, the department management in Hamburg is said to have had a conversation with him about his closeness to the Russian president. Seipel is said to have asserted that everything was okay. According to a statement, Seipel's hotel room was searched on the eve of his interview with Putin. Seipel does not want to comment on this; none of those who were present in Vladivostok noticed anything.

At some point, the executive is said to have decided to keep Seipel away from Russia-related topics.

The farewell film

Two and a half years after the Snowden film "Tapped and Nodded" (February 2017), Seipel was allowed to make one last film for *NDR*: "China - the new world power". The *ARD* studio in Beijing, which is staffed by *NDR*, *would* have liked to have made such a film itself. It had already produced a film about the Chinese section of the Silk Road and wanted to do the topic on a larger scale due to its geopolitical significance, preferably in cooperation with the *NDR* studios in Delhi and Singapore. But the documentary department in Hamburg turned down the proposal from the studio in Beijing.

A good year later they commissioned Seipel. It is said that the reason given was: "He needs a farewell film." Instead of letting his own correspondents shine, Seipel was allowed to stock up on archive material in the Beijing studio.

Putin for the third and fourth time

And the announcement that Seipel no longer wanted any Russia-related topics did not seem to be quite so fundamental. In any case, in June 2020, *NDR* approached *RBB* with a Seipel story and a detailed concept, again about Russia, again with Putin as one of the central protagonists. The proposed topic for the story had the working title: "Farewell to the USA? How American sanctions are dividing Europe and Germany". Those responsible at *RBB* took the contact to mean that *NDR* was looking for other production partners. The film was never made because it fell through both in the responsible departments at *NDR* and at *RBB*.

At the beginning of February 2022 Seipel started another attempt. A few days before Putin's invasion of Ukraine, he offered a Putin interview, this time to *RBB*. At the time, the broadcaster was chairing *ARD* and was led by Seipel's former programme director at *NDR*. He left unanswered whether he expected support from the *RBB* directorate for this proposal.

Exactly who received Seipel's offer and who forwarded it to whom could not be conclusively clarified. Only this much is remembered: There was "neither a concept nor a price tag".

On 9 February 2022, *WDR* learned of the proposal and sent a text message to the *ARD* editorial department: "Fortunately", *RBB* had consulted with *WDR* who was against it: firstly, it had "already been a disaster in 2014", secondly, Seipel had appeared together with Putin at the book fair in 2016 and thirdly, it would not show "backbone". At the time, Putin had just kicked Deutsche Welle out of Russia. It must be prevented that such an interview suddenly appears in the system, as it did back then. *ARD* promised support, and a few days later Putin invaded Ukraine. This put an end to the issue.

18. Conclusion

Hubert Seipel affirms that he did not receive any money from Russian sources for the filming of "Giant Gazprom" and "I, Putin". Our interviews did not reveal any evidence to the contrary.

The suspicion that he had his portrait film "I, Putin" approved by the Kremlin before it was broadcast cannot be substantiated either.

WDR's annoyance at the making of the film is understandable, but there was no reliable warning.

Even if we cannot prove it conclusively: the suspicion arises that Mordashov's money was not necessary to turn Seipel into a "Putin friend". Rather, it looks as if the author had succumbed to his vanity and was open to a bribe through proximity - even if he denies having lost the necessary distance. Over time, some had gained the impression that Seipel was even friends with Putin. This should have made him, the great journalist, suspicious, but the exclusive access was obviously too flattering.

It seems that Putin found a lone fighter in Seipel - bypassing the critical experts and correspondents - who guaranteed him favourable coverage in the important German market. In return, he provided staged but spectacular insights. From today's perspective, this may seem naive, but at the time Seipel was celebrated for it: by the Russian state-affiliated media, initially also by the German Feuilletons - and by the decision-makers at *NDR*.

The *NDR* must accept the accusation of having become intoxicated with Seipel's exclusive material. Although there has been no breach of duty, Seipel has been courted

too much and scrutinised too little over the years. As a Kremlin apologist also in *ARD* as a whole.

To this day, Seipel cannot recognise any conflict of interest in Mordashov's fees; they were intended for his books. He would not have been able to write them without the money. And yet the money and status conscious Seipel seemed to know that the payments would have meant the end of his career as a TV journalist. Otherwise, he could have made them transparent and saved himself the convoluted dealings with letterbox companies.

19. What can be learned from this?

It is always difficult to draw lessons from individual cases. Especially when a journalist teams up with a partner that is questionable from today's perspective, without disclosing that. You don't want to constrict an entire editorial team with even more rules just because one person has not adhered to journalistic standards. Nevertheless, NDR should consider the following suggestions. None of them would have prevented Seipel from being secretly paid by Mordashov, but it would have ensured a certain organisational distance and possibly ensured that his closeness to Putin did not become routine:

1. In the case of Hubert Seipel it is not a question of fraud, he did not make up anything, at most he omitted something. But it can't do any harm, especially in the case of public service broadcasting, which is committed to plurality:

- for the editorial team to sharpen its role in relation to freelance authors; elsewhere editors see themselves much more as a doorkeeper
- to draw the line at which professional expertise trumps attitude or conviction
- to clearly define the right degree of closeness to the protagonists, especially in portraits
- to establish a healthy form of suspicion, according to the motto: "This is now too good to be true."

2. In order to be able to comply with journalistic standards, you first have to know them. And in many places, there is often more need for information than one would expect. After the Relotius fraud case, for example, *SPIEGEL* developed a guideline as part of a workshop process that sets out the standards for everyone - freelancers also receive this guideline. Parts of the paper may sound obvious, but the work alone has sharpened the

senses once again. The questions listed under 1. should be answered in such a set of rules.

3. The compliance rules of *NDR* are extensive and attempt to sanction both economic and journalistic misconduct. The gift, secondary employment and travel guidelines have already been expanded and formulated several times in the past few years. Nevertheless, it should be checked whether the acceptance of invitations - as in the case of the trips with Putin - is regulated clearly enough, especially in the case of extensive research trips, and whether invoices do not also have to be claimed by third-party production companies.

4. After the Relotius case, *SPIEGEL* also had good experiences with the establishment of a clearing committee. It investigates external and internal indications of possible irregularities. These can be journalistic errors, irritations or other anomalies. A committee of this kind has the advantage that whistleblowers do not bounce off a wagon castle. It could also be an internal hygiene factor that, unlike *Zapp*, does not go on air straight away.

Timeline

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2006 German **Television Award** for "And you're out - Grohe"

01.10.2008 "**Living and dying for Kabul**"

14.01.2009 "**Giant Gazprom**"

2009 **Grimme Prize** for "Live and Die for Kabul"

02/08/2010 "**The world of Josef Ackermann**"

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27.02.2012 "**I, Putin**"

13.02.2013 "**The Syria trap**"

2013 **1st sponsorship agreement**

26.01.2014 "**Snowden Exclusiv - The Interview**"

2014 German **Television Award** for Snowden interview

16.11.2014 "**Putin - The Interview**"

19.11.2014 **Zapp programme** on Putin interview

2015 **1st Putin book**: "Putin. Inside views of power"

2016 Putin at book launch in **Moscow**, major event in Russian media

06.02.2017 "**Tapped and nodded off**"

2018 **2nd sponsorship agreement**

16.09.2019 "**China - the new world power**"

2021 **2nd Putin book**: "Putin's power. Why Europe needs Russia"

2021 **SWR1 "People"**: Interview with Seipel