

Hubert Seipel's Films for NDR
Expert Report for the NDR Task Force
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Methodology

This report focuses on Seipel's first productions for NDR: "Gigant Gazprom" (*Giant Gazprom*), "Ich, Putin" (*I, Putin*), "Die Syrien-Falle" (*The Syria Trap*), "Snowden Exklusiv - Das Interview" (*Snowden Exclusive - The interview*) and "Putin - Das Interview" (*Putin - The interview*). These were examined according to journalistic criteria. At the center stood the question of whether and which Kremlin narratives were adopted and whether context and proper placement were missing. The decisive factor here was the level of awareness at the time of broadcast. Moreover, Russian-speaking sources served to research the status Hubert Seipel enjoyed in Russia and how his publications were used there. The main emphasis in this report is on the content of the films. Television-specific aspects were given less consideration. As several productions involving Seipel have since been removed from the media libraries and archives, this report had to rely on the versions of the films circulating on the Internet.

"Giant Gazprom" (01/14/2009)

"The "Gazprom theme" – and the relationships with Russia in this context – constantly feature in the German media, but the topic is presented in a very one-sided manner. Besides, one keeps forgetting in the discussion that Russia is part of Europe. (...) It is a significant country for Europe. Which is why we need to draw closer to Russia and cooperate more closely with it, both politically and economically."

(Hubert Seipel 2009 in the Russian DW when asked what drew him to Gazprom)

In one of the first scenes of "Giant Gazprom", Gazprom Vice President Alexander Medvedev drives through Berlin in a car. Russian gas isn't arriving in Germany at the moment. The Victory Column and the TV Tower can be seen through the windows. The German station DLF reports on the car's radio: "Russia has completely stopped its deliveries amid the gas dispute with Ukraine." Russia has made offers, Medvedev asserts in the film. "They (Ukrainians) are stealing our gas. They started it." The narrator adds: "Moscow is nervous. Tense. Solutions are proposed in Moscow. Yet they become outdated a few hours later. Ukraine is playing poker."

This sets the tone for the film: Ukraine is jeopardizing the good business relationship between Gazprom and the German partners, between Russia and Germany. Therefore – according to the message, the Nord Stream Baltic Sea pipeline is necessary.

What the narrator does not say, which is also not revealed in the entire film, is that Russia is also playing poker. In 2009, the gas dispute with Ukraine had already been going on for several years. Gazprom is trying to achieve higher prices for gas exports, and the company wants to take over the Ukrainian pipeline network. All major political forces in Ukraine reject this. In addition to the economic conflict, there is also a political one. In 2004, Ukrainians successfully protested in the Orange Revolution against a rigged presidential election that was intended to bring the Russia-aligned Viktor Yanukovich to power. As a result, a democratization process has begun in Ukraine. New forces are turning towards the EU and NATO. Heiko Pleines from the Forschungsstelle Osteuropa (*Research Center for East European Studies*) in Bremen wrote in February 2009 in an essay on the Russian-Ukrainian natural gas conflict: "Russia's political leadership used this conflict to demonstrate Ukraine's dependence on Russia given its orientation towards the West (symbolized by its interest in NATO membership). This also confirms (as in the South Ossetia war) that Russia is aggressively pursuing its interests in the CIS while showing less and less consideration for international reactions." Vladimir Putin openly challenged the USA in his widely quoted speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference. By the time "Giant Gazprom" is produced, it is clear that Putin is claiming a say in its neighboring states and is using raw materials such as natural gas as an instrument to pursue aggressive interest-based politics. Georgia and the Republic of Moldova have already felt its impact in previous years – two countries equally trying to evade Russian influence. On the other hand, countries that signal loyalty to Russia receive rewards in the form of discounts.

Nevertheless, Hubert Seipel portrays Gazprom as a purely commercial company. Gas prices hit rock bottom, "which is another reason why Putin is being tough on Ukraine". Russia is in an economic crisis, with the threat of a relapse into the "chaotic 90s." Putin and Gazprom wanted to prevent this, which could be achieved with Nord Stream and increased exports to Germany.

In the film, former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who spent several years at the service of Gazprom, and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin speak of common German and Russian "national interests." Putin relies on special relations with Germany as Russia's partner within the EU. This already became clear in his speech to the Bundestag in 2001. And that is probably also why Putin will repeatedly grant exclusive access to a German journalist, Hubert Seipel, of all people. Putin can rely on German entrepreneurs. In "Giant Gazprom," a manager from BASF, a corporation involved with Nord Stream, praises the "extremely good experience" they had with the gas supplier Gazprom and Russia. Seipel omits an important

context here: Russia supplies Germany very reliably because it depends on German technologies and cooperation to exploit further mineral deposits.

A look at the German booklet "Gasprom. The Power from the Pipeline" from the journalist Gemma Pörzgen, which the Europäischen Verlagsanstalt (*European Publishing House*) published nearly two years earlier in 2007, shows just how much Seipel distorts by omission. Similarly, the booklet is not overly critical of Gazprom. Like Seipel, Pörzgen complains about an allegedly false and negative image of Gazprom and Russia in Germany. "Old preconceptions, stereotypes, and enemy imagery from the Cold War are back in fashion in Germany and accompany the justified concern and criticism of President Putin's authoritarian leadership style like an irritating melody. Following years of exaggerated Gorbachev euphoria and a very undifferentiated view of Boris Yeltsin, a new phase is now emerging in which, of all people, Vladimir Putin – who is well aligned with Germany – is becoming the enemy." ¹A "negative Gazprom story" is simply easier to sell, speculates a company spokesman in Moscow on Pörzgen's book. But Pörzgen, unlike Seipel, does at least quote some Russian opposition figures who criticize Gazprom. She mentions experts' doubts about the economic viability of the Nord Stream pipeline and environmentalists' concerns. Above all, she mentions Putin's "imperial foreign policy" and points out that back in 2003, Putin himself referred to Gazprom as "a powerful lever for influencing the rest of the world."

Yet Seipel says nothing about this. His interview partners are state representatives, managers, and lobbyists from the natural gas industry. The only "critic" of Gazprom, the oligarch and shareholder Alexander Lebedev, merely criticizes the company's lack of transparency.

There is a scene in the film in which gas workers in Novy Urengoy in the Arctic Circle drive to work in a company bus through freezing temperatures. The war song "Kombat" (*Combat*, short for battalion commander) by the Russian band Lyube plays on the bus. They specialize in "patriotic" songs and are considered Putin's favorite band. "Kombat" from 1996 is an ode to the commander who fires incessantly, takes care of his people, and has the whole country behind him. Almost everyone in Russia knows this song. Seipel's narrator explains: "There's a kind of war going on here too. Temperatures can drop to 50 degrees below zero." By relating the song to the working conditions in the Arctic Circle, he misses an important development in Russia. At this point, the militarization of society had long since begun.

¹ Gemma Pörzgen, *Gasprom. Die Macht aus der Pipeline*. Hamburg 2007.

For the first time since the end of the Soviet Union, Putin had heavy military equipment driven across the Red Square in 2008, right on May 9th, Russia's significant "Victory Day." Russia launched a military attack on neighboring Georgia. A reform of the Russian army begins. The scene with the war song vividly illustrates the kind of misconceptions of Russian society that Seipel's ignorance leads to.

Seipel later told Deutsche Welle's Russian program that the reactions of his interview partners to the film were "by and large positive."² "They think I was fair with Gazprom. On the one hand, I have shown that Gazprom's activities are still too intransparent and incomprehensible to the outside observer. On the other hand, we have endeavored to paint as objective a portrait of this company as possible and to dispel widespread prejudices." The bottom line is that in "Giant Gazprom," Seipel reflects the Kremlin narrative and Gazprom's PR at the time without considering the national and international context.

"I, Putin" (02/27/2012)

In the opening scene of "I, Putin," Seipel drives through Moscow with Putin in a car and introduces a question by saying that the West is ultimately asking him, Putin, to "be like the West" and to "kindly accept the rules of the West." For Putin, Seipel's intro is a golden opportunity. He replies with a smile: "I have to be what my people expect of me." In plain language, this means a breach of contract. Seipel leaves it at that.

Presidential elections are due in March 2012, and Putin's election campaign is all about being a "man of the people" for the people. Seipel underpins this image: "He must govern for the country's benefit. One man, one mission." Seipel confronts a premiere at the Bolshoi Theater attended by high-ranking guests from the political, business, and clerical spheres and cuts to Putin, who is practicing ice hockey, sweaty and solitary. "Distance from his predecessor and the new rich is helpful," says the narrator.

² <https://www.dw.com/ru/%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%B5%D1%86%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B9-%D0%B6%D1%83%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82-%D1%81%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B5%D0%B9-%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%84%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B9-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B9-%D0%B3%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BC-%D0%B2%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%82-%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%BC%D1%83-%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%B6%D1%83/a-4029048>

But this has little to do with the reality prevailing in the 2011/2012 winter. The film claims that the opposition has "successfully given the ruling party the label 'party of crooks and thieves,' but it is not just a label; it is based on serious research into corruption and enrichment in Putin's immediate environment.

In the fall of 2011, one of the most important Russian political weeklies, *The New Times / Novoye Vremya*, published the article "Russia Inc.: Putin and his friends have divided up the country." Over several double-page spreads, the paper graphically unravels the web of Putin's confidants in Russia's politics and economy. These are friends from his St. Petersburg dacha cooperative "Ozero," colleagues from the Secret Service and their children, as well as Putin's relatives. "Experts estimate that the Putin clan now controls assets worth between 4.5 and 6.8 trillion rubles – that's 10-15% of Russia's total annual GDP," writes *The New Times*. "Essentially, a vertically integrated holding company has been created across the sprawling country: its own credit institutions that provide working capital, its own cash factories that pump oil and gas out of the ground, its own pipeline systems, its own means of transport of all kinds, its own structures that provide security and weapons, its own communication channels, its own social services, its own support services, including media services, and its own instruments of political control in the form of a 'Parliament' and a 'Central Election Commission.'" According to the magazine, the system is primarily tailored to one man – Vladimir Putin.

This is not the first investigation regarding favoritism in Putin's circle. Opposition politician Boris Nemtsov, who was later murdered, published the essay "Putin. Itogi" ("*Putin. A Balance Sheet*") in 2008. A new version was issued in 2010 with millions of copies. The international press also discussed the follow-up report "Putin. Corruption" from 2011. Nemtsov said that Putin's friends had seized property worth 60 billion dollars. According to the report, Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev himself own 26 "palaces" and five yachts, which, in turn, the state has to maintain at great expense.

Instead of confronting him about this research, Seipel lets Putin say, without any remarks, that his children do not appear in public because they are "used to living as ordinary citizens."

Not only does Seipel ignore the findings, he even turns Putin into a victim. The film suggests he is in the "role of the persecuted," taking personally seemingly unfounded criticism. In reality, the Kremlin is still primarily in control of the situation at this point. The powerful national television channels widely ignore the opposition candidates. Serious observers

agree that the opposition has no chance. At least Seipel confronts Putin about the unfair election campaign and the hindering of opposition candidates. However, he does not probe further when Putin replies untruthfully: "The media functions quite normally and are thankfully not obstructed." At the beginning of 2012, the authorities cracked down on various media critical of the Kremlin, including Novaya Gazeta, Ekho Moskvyy, and TV Rain (TV Dozhd). Putin already had independent television channels closed or taken over at the beginning of the 2000s. As a result, self-censorship dominates journalism in Russia.

Seipel does not delve into the Khodorkovsky case either. When asked about the incarcerated oligarch, Putin refers to a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights, according to which the trial against the oligarch had "no political background." So far, so good. Yet, in the same ruling, the ECHR criticized violations of the right to a fair trial. Seipel also leaves that out.

A central theme in Putin's 2012 election campaign is foreign policy. Putin accuses Washington of planning a coup in Russia. The USA bought his opponents demonstrating in Moscow. In a survey conducted in February 2012, the independent Levada Institute found that three-quarters of Russians consider the USA to be an aggressor. This is partly due to Vladimir Putin's anti-Western election campaign rhetoric. At the end of February 2012, he shouted to 130,000 supporters in Moscow's Luzhniki Stadium: "We will not allow anyone to interfere in our internal affairs! We will not allow anyone to impose their will on us. (...) The battle for Russia continues. Victory is ours!"

Seipel does not question any of it. Instead, the narrator claims in "I, Putin": "Since NATO has been deploying missiles on Russia's borders, Russia has also been demonstrating its strength and is gearing up." This is a claim that Russian propaganda constantly repeats but which NATO denies. To date, there is no evidence of the deployment of NATO missiles in Russia's vicinity since 2011/2012.

Then there is the issue of the missile defense shield initiated by the USA, which the Russian government claims threatens Russia. Seipel notes that NATO argues that the missile defense shield is not directed against Russia but against Iran. Putin laughs in response. Seipel does not pursue the matter further. It is highly questionable that the Russian military actually feels threatened by the US missile defense system in Europe. Hannes Adomeit, Professor of Eastern European Studies, even considers it "impossible" and cites various

military reasons for this in 2008.³ For example, the trajectories of Russian ground- or sea-based intercontinental missiles would not pass over Europe if deployed against the USA but rather over the polar ice cap. Additionally, the commander of the Russian Air Force, General Vladimir Mikhailov, has described the potential US systems in Europe as "harmless" for Russia, especially as they are "stationary" and are not "offensive weapons." Another causality thus emerges. It is not NATO, nor the USA, that threatens Russia, but Putin uses the warnings of an allegedly aggressive NATO as a pretext to justify increasing armament spending. All these aspects remain unmentioned in Seipel's film.

It is almost negligent that "I, Putin" deals with an essential part of Putin's identity quite casually, so to speak: His affiliation with the secret service. Putin explains his move from the KGB to the team of the then-democratic mayor of St. Petersburg in the early 1990s as follows: There had been rumors at the time about imminent dismissals from the authorities. That's when he remembered his civilian training. Seipel's narrator confirms: "That was why Putin was looking for a new job." However, intelligence experts are not the only ones to assume that the KGB deliberately infiltrated its agents into democratic and business circles once the Soviet Union ended. Later, Putin himself returned to head the Secret Service for a while. Seipel fails to address him about this.

The largely uncritical handling of Vladimir Putin in "I, Putin" is also particularly controversial because the pro-Kremlin national broadcaster NTW announced that it would broadcast a Russian-language version of the film two days before the presidential election. At the time, NTW was making a name for itself with smear campaigns against the opposition. The airing date was postponed to the beginning of May 2012 at the last minute.

"The Syria Trap" (02/13/2013)

In 2012, the international debate on Syria revolved around the question of whether Russia would give up its support to Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. Assad is pilloried for the violence against his own civilian population. As relations between Syria and the Western states come to a head, Syria's ambassador in Moscow holds a press conference, and Russian media reports extensively on alleged US plans to attack Syria militarily. Russia categorically rejects external intervention and the overthrow of Assad. Under these circumstances, Hubert Seipel is allowed to conduct an exclusive interview with Assad.

³ https://internationalepolitik.de/system/files/article_pdfs/IP_02_Adomeit.pdf

Assad claims that terrorism has been brought to Syria from abroad. Seipel uses the narrative script to distance himself from Assad's overly unrealistic statements. Representatives of the Syrian opposition do not get a chance to speak - an omission. In the film, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov equates Syria's armed opposition with terrorists: "No one can ignore the fact that armed units, the so-called Free Syrian Army, and troops like Al-Qaeda are committing acts of terrorism." Nevertheless, Kofi Annan, the short-term UN Special Envoy for Syria, who is also interviewed, refers to the Syrian "civil rights movement that led to today's civil war."

In "The Syria Trap", Seipel adopts the Kremlin narrative of an aggressive NATO, just as in the film "I, Putin". It is linked to the discussion surrounding a no-fly zone over Syria. The film states: "NATO started its war in Libya against Gaddafi with the help of such a zone." The abbreviation of this statement is highly problematic, partly because it was the UN Security Council that decided on the no-fly zone in Libya in 2011 and Russia supported the decision by abstaining.

What Seipel almost omits is that Russia has enormous interests of its own in Syria and in keeping Assad in power. Russia maintains a naval base in Tartus, Syria, the only one abroad apart from Sevastopol in Crimea. At the beginning of 2012, a Russian freighter arrived in Tartus with tons of ammunition on board. Given the Syrian opposition's criticism of Russia, the future of this base would be uncertain if Assad were to fall. Russian flags have regularly been burned at their rallies. In a way, the opposition is also waging a war against Russia, which also goes unmentioned.

Alongside military and geopolitical interests, Putin aims to prevent another democratic change of power brought on by protests. Peaceful revolutions are one of the things that the powerful in Moscow probably fear the most and which they, therefore, do their best to thwart. The Russian opposition activist Andrei Piontkovsky said in 2012: "Putin believes that Syria is just a test for a US-organized coup in Russia."

Nevertheless, Seipel presents Russia as a potential neutral mediator. And Russia does indeed invite various Syrian groups to Moscow for negotiations. However, it won't be long before those forces that many Western states recognize as legitimate Syrian representatives are excluded. The viewer learns nothing about this either.

Compounding these omissions is a serious lapse in the research concerning the "Power of images." According to Seipel's account, the Syrian opposition has gained interpretative

authority among the international public. Amongst other things, Seipel illustrates this with the massacre in Hula. At least one hundred civilians were killed there in May 2012, including many women and children. There is a "public willingness to believe that the Assad regime alone could have committed the Hula massacre," says the narrator in "The Syria Trap." It is implied that the rebels could be responsible. Seipel asks Kofi Annan about this. He replies that he first wants to wait for the report of a UN commission. This UN report appeared on August 15th, 2012, and is unequivocal: "Based on the available evidence, the Commission has a reasonable basis to believe that the perpetrators of the deliberate killing of civilians at both the Abdulrazzak and Al-Sayed family sites were allied with the government. (...) This conclusion is bolstered by the lack of credible information supporting other possibilities."

Seipel's film was not released for another six months. Nevertheless, he ignores the UN report. This creates the impression that it is impossible to establish the truth in situations like Syria in any case, that there is nothing but "rumors" about war crimes. In this way, Seipel contributes to the Russian disinformation objective of undermining trust in facts and institutions.

"Snowden Exclusive - The Interview" (01/26/2014)

Seipel's interview with Edward Snowden is the first exclusive interview worldwide granted by the whistleblower to a journalist after he arrived in Russia. It is essentially devoted to the NSA's wiretapping practices in Germany. Snowden's claim that the NSA not only eavesdropped on politicians but also engaged in industrial espionage, including at Siemens, caused a stir in Germany. Hans-Christian Ströbele, a member of the Bundestag who had spoken to Snowden himself in Moscow a few weeks earlier, took the interview as an opportunity to address the accusation of industrial espionage in the Bundestag.

Russia is criticized for putting pressure on civil society and restricting human rights. Leading US politicians and Chancellor Merkel repeatedly raised this issue with Putin. The fact that the US citizen Snowden is now seeking protection from the USA in Russia of all places and that Germany, among others, is refusing to take him in is welcome proof for many Russian politicians that the rule of law in the West is not in particularly good shape either. Sergei Naryshkin, for example, Chairman of the State Duma, says: "Edward Snowden is a human rights activist; he stands up for the rights of millions of people around the world. The USA imposes the death penalty, and the risk that Edward Snowden will be sentenced to death in the USA is very high. We do not have the right to allow this to happen. That is why Russia must grant Snowden political asylum or temporary refuge." Hubert Seipel asks Snowden

about which Western countries he has applied for asylum. Snowden lists them and adds that they are all countries "that unfortunately considered it more important to support the political interests of the USA than to do the right thing." His answer perfectly illustrates the view propagated by the Kremlin that the German government, like most EU states, is basically a mere vicarious agent of the USA. For years, Putin has been trying to drive a wedge between the USA and the EU or Germany, as he already announced in his speech to the Bundestag in 2001. To this extent, Snowden and the NSA affair are a stroke of luck for Putin.

The fact that the Kremlin is profiting from this cannot be a reason not to cover the NSA's espionage in Germany from a journalistic perspective. Reporting should not be based on whether it benefits Kremlin propaganda or not. However, good journalism takes this aspect into account and addresses it. Seipel fails to do this. Nor does he mention the fact that Snowden has chosen Russia as a place of refuge where the Secret Service is also expanding its surveillance methods massively. He does not ask Snowden whether and to what extent the Russian state might restrict him. He merely asks whether Snowden had made a "deal" with Russia: "asylum in exchange for secret information."

When Snowden denies this, Seipel does not probe any further. Snowden's press conference at Sheremetyevo airport already suggested that the Russian regime provided him with organizational support. At the time, he was assisted by a lawyer loyal to the Kremlin. Soon afterward, Snowden was granted political asylum in Russia – in a fast-track procedure.

How important it would have been to address all of this will become clear three months after the interview is broadcast during Putin's annual televised public address. Snowden appears on video and asks the Russian president whether Russia is also spying on its citizens en masse: "Is Russia intercepting, storing or analyzing the communications of millions of people? And do you believe that increasing the effectiveness of intelligence work and law enforcement investigations can serve to justify subjecting not only individuals but entire societies to surveillance?" The question is a golden opportunity for Vladimir Putin: "Dear Mr. Snowden, you are a former agent; I used to be involved in this too; let's talk among professionals. It's not something we do on a mass scale. The law forbids it, and we will never allow it. We also lack the technical capabilities and funds that the USA has. But above all, thank God, the state and society strictly control our security services." In Russian expert circles, the dialog is met with head-shaking and sneers. According to intelligence expert Andrei Soldatov, the FSB had full access to internet and telephone connections in 2014, and it is hard to imagine that Snowden was unaware of this. His question to Putin seems contrived and gives the impression that Snowden is not as free in Russia as Seipel's film

suggests.

"Putin - The Interview" (11/16/2014)

When Seipel filmed the exclusive interview with Putin in the fall of 2014, Russia had occupied Crimea and started the war in eastern Ukraine. In the fall of 2014, it was known that Russia had supplied weapons to the Donbas. German media correspondents also saw these weapons and soldiers from Russia in the Donbas. Guardian and Daily Telegraph correspondents even witnessed a Russian military convoy making use of the darkness to cross the green border into the part of Ukraine not controlled by Kyiv in mid-August. They counted 23 vans and ten combat vehicles with official Russian military license plates.⁴

Nevertheless, in the interview with Putin, Seipel speaks of the "Kyiv government's and the president's claim that Russia is supporting the separatists with weapons and soldiers." He also tells of the "crisis in Ukraine" instead of "war" – thereby already adopting Kremlin narratives in his questions. Instead of confronting Putin with the findings about the Russian military in Ukraine, he ascribes Russia the role of a virtually uninvolved mediator: "Can Russia do more? Doesn't Russia have even more influence over Ukraine to ensure that this process (the Minsk negotiations) is implemented more quickly (...), so to speak?"

Unsurprisingly, Putin denies the unlawful nature of the annexation as well as the proven Russian involvement in the clashes in Donbas. Unchallenged, he talks about the alleged threat of "ethnic cleansing" in Ukraine and compares Crimea with Kosovo. This is an absurd comparison, as the NATO intervention in 1999 was preceded by massive discrimination against Albanians in Kosovo, including civilian massacres. There was nothing of the sort in Crimea. But Putin's claims remain unchanged.

Russia has recognized the free choice of alliance of all states and the inviolability of borders in the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997, among other things. In the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, Russia - along with the USA and Great Britain - guaranteed Ukraine the protection of its borders in return for Ukraine giving up its nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, in the interview with Seipel, Putin once again spreads the legend of NATO's eastward expansion threatening Russia, once again speaks of US bases "near our borders,"

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/14/russian-military-vehicles-enter-ukraine-aid-convoy-stops-short-border>

and once again claims that "no one" has taken "one step" towards Russia. Seipel, on his part, once again speaks of "arguments of the West" when it comes to facts: "For the West, this (the annexation of Crimea) was an international law violation."

Later, Seipel justified his interview. He was "not the missionary type"; he asked questions and let people answer. But if answers contain lies and half-truths, they should not be left standing. ORF presenter Armin Wolf showed in 2018 that things can be done differently. He takes the half-truths and excuses with which Putin usually responds to critical questions into account in his questions. However, this requires expertise and thorough preparation.

Echo in Russia: Seipel in the Russian media

"There is a genuine hunt for people in the West who want to convey the Kremlin's point of view. The 'right' American and European political observers are worth their weight in gold for us. There aren't many of them, so the editors guard their phone numbers like the apple of their eye. Everyone plays by clearly defined rules." This is how Marina Ovsyannikova describes working at the "Pervy Kanal."⁵ Ovsyannikova worked in the newsroom of the Russian state television station for several years until she protested live in the studio against Russia's large-scale attack on Ukraine during the main evening news program at the end of February 2022, lost her job as a result, and later fled abroad.

One of these sought-after experts is Hubert Seipel. It didn't take long before he appeared in the Kremlin-controlled Russian media. The coverage of "Giant Gazprom" is still limited in Russia. But Russian media were already reporting on "I, Putin" during the filming in October 2011. The daily newspaper Izvestija asked Seipel for details. When Putin's spokesman Peskov also commented ("That was the Germans' initiative. Similar proposals also came from other foreign journalists, but after ARD's request. We are not planning any more films now."), numerous other Russian print and online media also reported. The day after the broadcast of "I, Putin" on ARD, the portal Newsru.com reported that the "well-known German director Hubert Seipel" had "given Putin a human face." The nationwide television station NTW, owned by Gazprom-Media, which originally wanted to show the film shortly before the presidential election, finally broadcast it in prime time on May 7th, 2012, on the day of Putin's inauguration, one day after the last major opposition demonstration in Moscow was brutally

⁵ Marina Owsjannikowa, Zwischen Gut und Böse. Wie ich mich endlich der Kreml-Propaganda entgegenstellte. München 2023. (*Between Good and Evil. How I finally stood up to Kremlin propaganda. Munich 2023*)

dispersed. Seipel's exclusive interview with Putin in November 2014 was also published in Russia on the Kremlin's website and in the government newspaper Rossiyskaya Gazeta. At least some excerpts were broadcast on RT and Sputnik.

In the fall of 2015, a Spiegel interview with Seipel triggered a massive response in Russia. The Russian Air Force had just launched its military mission in Syria. Rossiyskaya Gazeta compiled international press reports. The headline reads: "Western media reacts with understanding to the Russian operation in Syria." Seipel quotes them as saying that for Moscow, Assad and his army are a "stabilizing factor in a state that is falling apart." In Seipel's opinion, "Moscow was right when it warned the West against interfering in the Middle East." Inosmi, a state-run internet portal that translates selected foreign articles into Russian, reports extensively on the Spiegel conversation, as does the fiercely pro-Kremlin nationalist portal Antimaidan. Their headline reads: "Der Spiegel: The West demonizes Putin". A photo shows Seipel and Putin in an interview. This alleged "demonization" of Putin in Western media is a claim with which Seipel is repeatedly quoted in Russian media.

When Seipel presented his first Putin book on "Russia Today" at the building of the state agency RIA in Moscow in June 2016, real hype was created around his person. He was hailed as a courageous outsider who was going against the tide. Seipel granted a well-known reporter from the Rossiya 24 television channel an interview lasting around 6 minutes. Rossiyskaya Gazeta published a conversation with Seipel. It began with the question: "Is it difficult to express an opinion in Germany about the President of Russia that contradicts the mainstream media?" An accompanying short note about Seipel reads: "In 2012, he filmed the documentary 'I, Putin. A Portrait,' in which he refused to demonize the 'Putin system'". Vladimir Putin also commented on the book: "I don't know why Mr. Seipel did this; I warned him that he would get a slap on the wrist if he wrote objectively. If, on the other hand, he writes the way they want him to where he works, then everything will go well for him." Once again, Putin instrumentalized Seipel as a source for the narrative of the alleged lack of press freedom in Germany. The pro-Kremlin "Moscow Office for Human Rights" puts the icing on the cake by titling an interview with Seipel on its own website with his quote: "I have been granted complete creative freedom in Russia."⁶ At the same time, Seipel hints in the interview at how he sees his own role vis-à-vis Putin: "I don't hide the fact that I have good feelings towards Vladimir Putin. But that doesn't mean that I have to avoid critical remarks. I have gained the impression that the President of Russia takes a very calm approach to criticism and is prepared to listen to and accept it."

⁶ <http://pravorf.org/index.php/news/2304-nemetskij-publitsist-i-kinodokumentalist-khubert-zajpel>

In the fall of 2016, the broadcaster NTW, which had already broadcast "I, Putin," aired Seipel's film "This is Putin." The media reports on the matter do not reveal whether this is an entirely new film or whether material from the 2012 Putin biopic was also used. According to a report in the daily newspaper Kommersant, Seipel himself takes center stage in the film: "The film is dedicated to a German journalist's view of the Russian leader, who was allowed to follow the President of Russia everywhere for several years.

Seipel has become a reliable advocate for Putin, who brings Kremlin narratives not only to the German public but also to the Russian public – as a supposedly external, independent observer.

Concluding Remarks

It has been 15 years since Hubert Seipel made his first Russia-related film for NDR. He adopted the positions of Putin and the Russian power elites without critically questioning them in his films and interviews – even though the information needed for a critical assessment was available before the respective films were released. These films became particularly sensitive because the Kremlin used them extensively for self-reflection. Seipel allowed himself to be utilized or exploited.

Seipel's films are a phenomenon of a time when it was often said in Germany that we should "show a positive Russia" and "not always report so negatively." This trend was heavily promoted by PR professionals, including the GPlus agency in Brussels. The agency also worked for Gazprom, advised Russia during the war against Georgia in 2008, and had its name removed from the lobby register by the EU Commission in 2009 for violating transparency regulations. Seipel's films catered to a longing for harmony or normality towards Russia, which later led to large sections of the German public not recognizing the war that Russia started against Ukraine in 2014 as a war.

Seipel's films are not part of the requisite domestic pluralism of public service broadcasting. After all, this is not about films with "different" perspectives or focal points. These would be legitimate and even necessary. Anyone who justifies or praises Seipel's films as a "pro-Kremlin" counterweight to "anti-Kremlin" reporting is arguing with the wrong labels and implying that journalism is based on opinion. That is not the point. It's about spreading false information through false narratives and distortions of reality.

A similar false understanding of domestic pluralism and opinion diversity could be observed for years in talk shows and not only on public television, for which those responsible deliberately sought out "other points of view" and invited interviewees who had no expertise to substantiate this "other point of view."⁷ A similar approach was repeatedly used when selecting interview partners for public radio stations. This made it possible for Seipel and his Kremlin narratives to be embraced in Germany for a long time and for his propaganda-infused films to be presented as an equal part of the debate to the detriment of the journalistic research of correspondents and reporters on the ground.

The debate about this so-called false balance started far too late in Germany, in fact, not until after the expansion of the war against Ukraine in February 2022. Given the ongoing massive disinformation from Russia and China and other significant issues of the time, the Seipel case should be an opportunity to rethink this editorial policy in general and raise awareness of the boundary between equilibrium and false balance.

⁷ See the study by Marcus Welsch in the Ukraine Analysis No. 289 from 10/5/2023
<https://www.laender-analysen.de/ukraine-analysen/289/russlands-aggression-gegenueber-der-ukraine-in-den-deutschen-talkshows-2013-2023-eine-empirische-analyse-der-studiogaeste/>