

Insight

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Analysis: Guide to Russian political talk shows

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Talk shows on Russian TV use a variety of techniques to create a semblance of real debate

Following Russia's intervention in Ukraine in 2014, pro-Kremlin TV channels introduced a slew of political talk shows featuring relentless criticism of the country's perceived foes abroad.

In contrast to established evening discussion programmes hosted by star presenters such as Vladimir Solovyov, the new afternoon shows mostly target less politically savvy audiences.

During the 2017 television season, the amount of airtime allocated to two flagship current affairs shows - Vremya Pokazhet and 60 Minut - doubled, allowing them to cover both the afternoon and early evening prime time.

According to Mediascope, the sole company that is authorised to carry out TV audience research in Russia, both programmes appeared to be consistently among the top 30 of the “100 most popular programmes among Russians above four years old” (in the weeks between 26 March and 29 April 2018).

An analysis by BBC Monitoring of key talks shows broadcast by state-controlled TV between September 2017 and mid-April 2018 shows that they are dominated by anti-Western rhetoric, with the US and Ukraine the main bogeymen.

The programmes monitored were Vremya Pokazhet (state-controlled Channel One TV); 60 Minut, Večer and Voskresny Večer s Vladimirom Solovyovym (state Rossiya 1 TV); Mesto Vstrechi (Gazprom-Media’s NTV) and Pravo Golosa (Moscow city-owned Centre TV).

Domestic issues rarely get a mention, with the exception of elections and major disasters.

The programmes create a semblance of real political discussion while promoting Kremlin policy using a variety of techniques that range from the selection and treatment of guests to the distortion of facts.

Presenters are often not neutral moderators, but key players who steer the conversation in the desired direction.

Disjointed in nature, the debates frequently descend into slanging matches or occasionally even physical confrontation. Reinforcing the official narrative and undermining opposing views seem more important than getting to the heart of an issue or encouraging critical thinking.

1. MAIN THEMES

Both daily and weekly talk shows on pro-Kremlin TV are heavily dominated by foreign policy topics, with a near complete disregard for domestic matters.

The messages conveyed by the shows in recent years roughly fall into six main categories:

The US as a domineering but declining power

President Donald Trump as a victim of the US political establishment

Ukraine as a "failed state"

The EU in the grip of moral decline and misguided hostility towards Russia

Kremlin setbacks cast as part of a wider Western "Russophobic" conspiracy

Praise for Putin as a great leader

Together they foster the impression that Russia is under attack on all sides but is destined to prevail thanks to Western shortcomings and Putin’s strong leadership.

1.1 US 'hegemony'

While criticism of the West in general is a staple, the US and its foreign policy are a particular target.

One recurring theme is the perceived imminent end of the US's preeminent position in the world.

In December 2017, Rossiya 1's 60 Minut suggested that US "hegemony" is "no more", and spun Washington's new National Security Strategy naming Russia and China as US competitors as recognition of Moscow's new-found power and influence.

In January, the topic was also discussed on Channel One's Vremya Pokazhet, where both presenters and their guests talked about "the end of the unipolar world", predicting that - like the Roman Empire - Washington would eventually lose the role of global leader.

Another object of criticism is US support for democratic movements around the world.

Discussing the fourth anniversary of the "Maidan" anti-government protests in Ukraine, presenter Artyom Sheynin accused the US of pursuing a policy of controlled chaos to promote its interests in countries like Ukraine or Syria under the guise of democratisation.

His view was seconded by a guest who said a similar tactic had been used in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya.

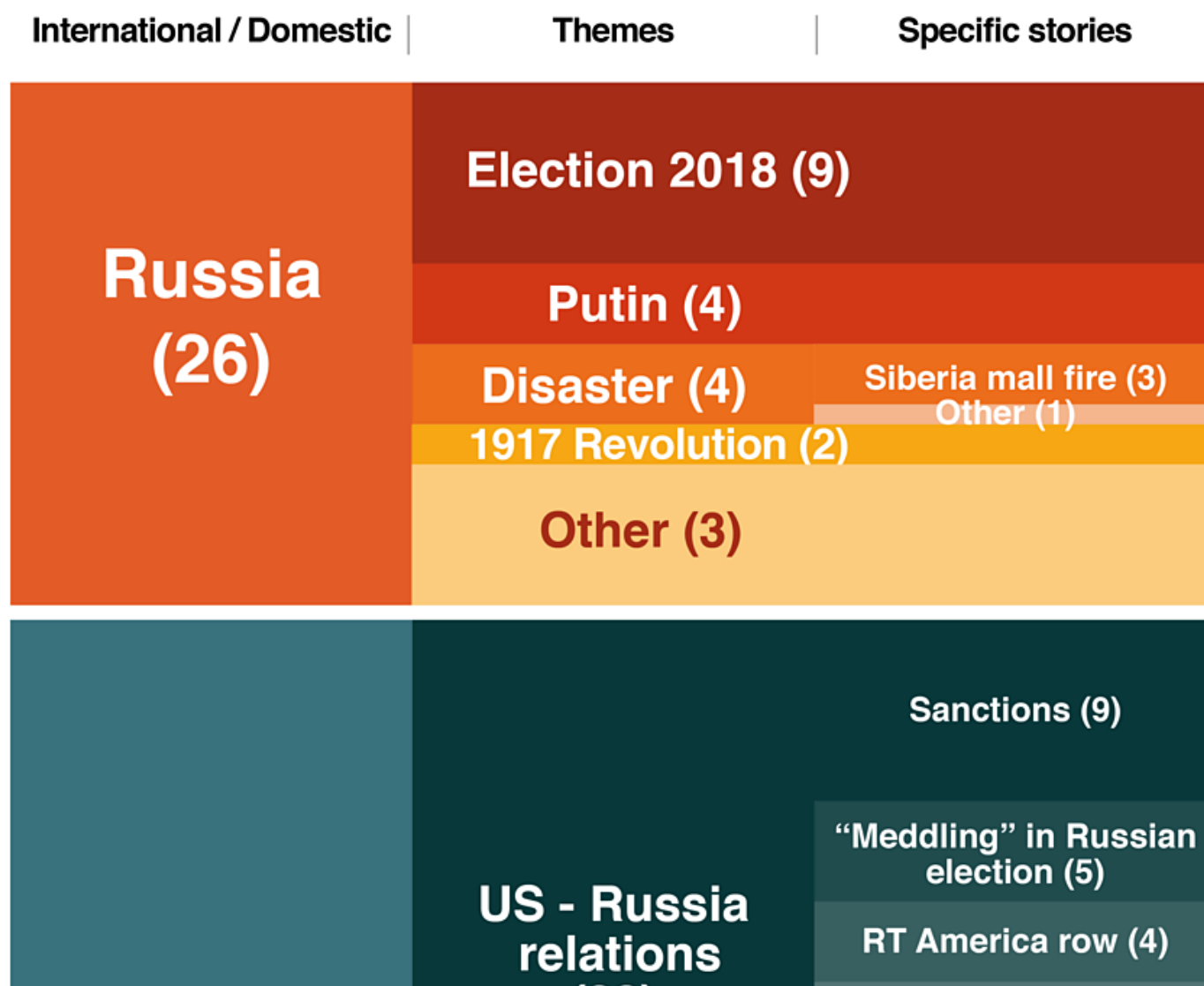
The portrayal of the US as an "aggressor" state often [goes hand in hand with](#) praise for Russia as a "peacemaker" and a power that "has no global project and no claims to global domination".

Content of Russian Channel One talk show 'Vremya Pokazhet'

Breakdown of discussion segments of 155 afternoon editions aired between 4/9/17 and 13/4/18



Breakdown by topic



US (58)	(33)	Diplomatic property (4)
		Putin -Trump (3)
		Other (8)
	US foreign policy (13)	Arms supplies (3)
		US - North Korea (3)
	Trump (6)	Other (8)
As leader (3)		
US Domestic affairs (6)	Jerusalem embassy (2)	
	Other (1)	
Ukraine (32)	Opposition and protests (10)	Mikheil Saakashvili (5)
		Other (5)
	East Ukraine conflict (8)	Donbass reintegration bill (2)
		Peacekeeper initiatives (2)
	Ukraine - Russia relations (4)	Other (4)
		Ukraine - EU relations (3)
	Other (7)	New laws (2)
Other (5)		
Syria (16)	Conflict (9)	Douma attack (4)
		Other (5)
	Russian operation (5)	
Diplomacy (2)		

Olympics (16)	Doping accusations (12)
	Sports (4)
UK (15)	Skripal poisoning (14)
	Other (1)
The West (11)	“Russophobia” (8)
	Other (3)
North Korea (5)	
Other (14)	Zapad drills with Belarus (3)
	Other international issues (11)

Source: Russian Channel 1

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Current affairs talk shows on state TV are heavily dominated by foreign policy topics

1.2 Trump

In contrast to the line on the US as a whole, Russian state TV talk shows are less critical of Trump, whom they tend to portray as a hostage of US domestic political struggles.

Marking the anniversary of Trump's 2016 election victory, presenters and guests on 60 Minut agreed that the president had proved a disappointment to those in Russia who hoped he might improve bilateral relations.

"Trump wants good deals with Russia, but even where those deals are possible, he gets slapped on the wrist by Congress, the Pentagon, the CIA, and others," senior lawmaker Konstantin Kosachyov told the programme.

A few days later, Federation Council member Alexei Pushkov expressed a similar idea on Sunday night's Voskresny Vecher s Vladimirom Solovyovym, saying Trump's personal views on Russia were "not supported by the logic of American politics".

"He tells us: 'Guys, I can't do anything and in fact don't expect anything, but I personally trust Putin'," [Pushkov explained](#).

1.3 Ukraine as 'failed' state

Another common target is Ukraine and its ruling elite.

The country is portrayed as a state on the brink of collapse, managed by corrupt officials who act on the orders of their "Western sponsors".

[In a typical example](#), senior Russian lawmaker Olga Kovitidi told Vremya Pokazhet in September 2017 that Ukraine was on the verge of radicalisation and bloody upheaval after the return of the former Georgian president and sacked Odessa Region governor, Mikheil Saakashvili.

"We can only pray to God to save Russia from such manifestations of democracy," she concluded.

Commenting on Pravo Golosa on talks between US Ukraine envoy Kurt Volker and President Petro Poroshenko, [pro-Kremlin pundit Sergei Markov](#) alleged that Ukraine is not independent but a US "puppet", where "all key decisions are made by American officials rather than Poroshenko himself".

Similar ideas have been repeatedly expressed by guests of Voskresny Vecher s Vladimiron Solovyovym and 60 Minut in recent months.

Ukraine and its politicians are often subjected to ridicule and mockery, even if the country is not on the main news agenda.

In December, the two presenters of 60 Minut - Olga Skabeyeva and Yevgeny Popov - kicked off a discussion of Trump's National Security Strategy with [a swipe at a promotional video](#) by Ukraine as well as Saakashvili's allegedly poor Russian grammar.

1.4 European 'tolerance' and sanctions

Another popular topic is the EU and its Russia policy.

Presenters and guests often ponder the possibility of sanctions on Russia being lifted, stressing the negative impact they have on the economies of European states.

"European businesses are suffering huge losses because of the sanctions," Olga Kovitidi told Vremya Pokazhet last November, hinting that some EU officials were trying to "prepare the ground" for their removal.

"This is all about money, and about [Europe's] own economic and political interests," [she concluded](#).

Similarly, in late March, deputy State Duma speaker Pyotr Tolstoy [claimed that the EU sanctions](#) and its support for Ukraine had "exhausted themselves", with some of the bloc's members allegedly planning to raise the question of lifting them when they come up for revision in the summer.

European and Western values are often contrasted unfavourably with "traditional" (conservative) Russian values.

This topic is particularly prominent on Mesto Vstrechi (NTV) and Pravo Golosa, where both guests and presenters often criticise a perceived culture of permissiveness in the West and warn about the dangers of gender equality.

Commenting on women in Europe pursuing political careers, prominent nationalist writer [Eduard Limonov told Mesto Vstrechi](#) on 24 November that "the fact that eight European countries have women as defence ministers is a result of the decline of Europe".

[Over on Pravo Golosa](#), pundit Natalia Pochinok on 1 February accused Europe and the rest of the West of attempting to take "deliberate steps to impose the culture of neutral gender and the culture of permissiveness" on Russia.

1.5 'Russophobia'

As is the case on the main evening news programmes on Russia's main TV stations, the political talk shows present international controversies involving Russia as a sign of "Russophobia", or as part of a bigger Western plot aimed at damaging Russia's image.

In one recent example, state TV talk shows reacted with anger and dismay to the UK allegation that Russia was "highly likely" to be behind the poisoning of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, dismissing the incident as an act of provocation.

"The Skripal provocation is just another attempt to get people not to go to the World Cup, not to congratulate Putin and not to recognise the result of the [Russian presidential] election," senior State Duma deputy [Leonid Kalashnikov told 60 Minut](#) on 20 March.

The same argument was made [earlier in March by Andrei Lugovoi](#), a suspect in the murder case of Alexander Litvinenko and a regular guest on 60 Minut.

"I think that this story is part of someone's grand plan to discredit Russia," he said.

Rossiya 1's top presenter Solovyov went even further, accusing the West of trying to topple the Russian government by supporting an uprising against it, as - according to Solovyov - it had against Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

"They are trying to present us as some sort of global evil, any contact with which is pernicious and which has to be fought by any possible methods," he said before concluding that the Skripal affair was "another information political campaign based on provocations".

Over the past six months, a similar approach has been used in relation to a variety of topics, including attacks on Russian media abroad, allegations of meddling in the US presidential election, charges of Russian state-sponsored doping in sport and the suspected chemical attack in the former Syrian rebel stronghold Douma.

1.6 Putin, the 'absolute leader'

While the lion's share of debates on state TV are negative in tone, there's lavish praise of President Vladimir Putin.

During the presidential election campaign and immediately after the 18 March vote, Putin was hailed as a true national leader and unifying figure on the Russian political scene.

In January, [senior lawmaker Igor Morozov](#) urged viewers of 60 Minut to vote for Putin, describing him as a "man who shouldered an incredibly heavy burden" and intervened in Crimea and Donbass "to prevent genocide".

After the polls closed, film director Karen Shakhnazarov told an election special broadcast from the 60 Minut studio that Putin was the "only leader in Europe or even the world to have emerged from the people".

Over on Channel One, another pro-Kremlin commentator, Sergei Kurginyan, said the fact that Putin had won more than 70 per cent of the vote meant he would now be an "absolute leader" (<https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c1doyocb>).

Presenters and guests also tend to rally around Putin in response to events that pose a risk to the authorities' popularity.

A recent example was reaction to a major fire in March at a shopping centre in the Siberian city of Kemerovo, which killed 64 people and prompted criticism of the regional government and prevalence of corruption in Russia.

"I would like to say words of condolence and support to our leader Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin," Federation Council member Yelena Mizulina told Vecher s Vladimirom Solovyovym, describing the blaze as "a stab in the back" for the president.

She went on to [call Putin a "spiritual warrior"](#), noting that he is doing "incredible things for Russia today, defending Russia in the foreign arena and at home pursuing reforms with incredible force".

Her remarks unleashed a wave of criticism and sarcasm on social media (<https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c1dp08ut>).

2. KEY SHOWS

2.1 Voskresny Vecher s Vladimirom Solovyovym

Voskresny Vecher s Vladimirom Solovyovym ("Sunday Evening with Vladimir Solovyov") is a weekly political talk show on state-owned Rossiya 1 TV, presented by star host Solovyov.

It features both panel debates and interviews with high-profile newsmakers. Its duration varies from two to three and a half hours.

First broadcast in September 2012, Voskresny Vecher replaced another show presented by Solovyov, called Poyedinok ("Duel"), which consisted of a debate between two guests.

"We set ourselves the task of creating a programme for the intelligent and interested viewer that would allow us to discuss topical issues in various formats - from a one-to-one interview to a round table," [Solovyov said](#) at the time.

At the height of the crisis in Ukraine following the ouster of President Viktor Yanukovich and Russian annexation of Crimea, the programme was gradually introduced into the daily schedule as a "special edition" of Voskresny Vecher, called Vecher s Vladimirom Solovyovym.

Since October 2017, it has been broadcast regularly on all weekdays except Friday.

2.2 Vremya Pokazhet

Vremya Pokazhet ("Time Will Tell") is state-controlled Channel One's flagship daytime talk show.

Launched in September 2014, at the height of hostilities in eastern Ukraine, it was Channel One's first daytime political discussion programme.

Prominent [TV critic Irina Petrovskaya](#) described the programme as "politics for housewives", aimed, she said, at presenting a "primitive" black-and-white view of the world.

Since summer 2017, the show has been broadcast twice daily from Monday to Friday - at 12:15 and 17:00 (09:15 and 14:00 GMT).

In June 2017, possibly in response to fears that younger audiences were abandoning state TV for the internet and social media, Vremya Pokazhet started asking viewers to contact its Twitter account and broadcasting their messages on screen.

But evidence soon emerged that the show was using internet trolls and bots - their automated version - to ensure the social media comments it aired were tightly controlled (<https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c1djikcz>).

2.3 60 Minut

60 Minut ("60 Minutes") is a political talk show on Rossiya 1 broadcast twice a day Monday to Friday.

Launched in September 2016 as an evening talk show, the programme soon became [one of the top political programmes](#) on weekdays.

In August 2017, the channel [introduced a second edition of 60 Minut](#) earlier in the day, at 13:00 (10:00 GMT), saying it would now spend "not 60, but 120 minutes" debating the "topics of the day".

The format of the show mimics that of Vecher s Vladimirom Solovyovym, featuring a mix of interviews with high-profile newsmakers and studio discussions.

Its presenters - Olga Skabeyeva and Yevgeny Popov - assert that their programme is not a "talk show" per se, but rather ["information talk"](#) offering serious discussion of the latest news stories.

2.4 Pravo Golosa

Pravo Golosa ("Right to Speak" or "Right to Vote") is a political talk show on Moscow government-controlled Centre TV hosted by TV presenter and commentator Roman Babayan.

The programme was first broadcast on the now defunct Moscow regional Channel Three in 2010 and relaunched on Centre TV two years later, after the former's closure.

In addition to studio debates, Pravo Golosa sometimes features polls conducted among viewers, who are urged to answer the "question of the day" at the top of the programme.

2.5 Mesto Vstrechi

Mesto Vstrechi is a daily political talk show on NTV, the third main national TV channel, owned by Kremlin corporate ally Gazprom-Media Holding. The programme has been on air since February 2016.

Featuring a panel of regular guests, it tends to be more sarcastic and emotional in tone than similar daily programmes on other major TV channels.

The presenters - Olga Belova and Andrei Norkin - often employ sarcasm when talking to guests expressing a pro-Western stance.

Mesto Vstrechi has repeatedly made headlines in the Russian media owing to heated arguments and fistfights in the studio.

3. PRESENTERS

3.1 Vladimir Solovyov

One of the top presenters on Russian TV, Solovyov, 54, is best known for hosting talk shows on state TV and radio, as well as a series of flattering documentaries about Putin.

After spending time in the US in the early 1990s, Solovyov returned to Russia and started working as a radio journalist in 1997.

In the 2000s, he was a TV presenter on several national television channels, before signing a contract with state-owned Rossiya 1.

Solovyov currently hosts two evening talk shows on Rossiya 1: *Vecher s Vladimirom Solovyovym* and its weekend version, *Voskresny Vecher*.

He also presents a morning programme on Vesti FM, a state-run radio station.

In 2015, Solovyov interviewed Putin for *The President*, a documentary film devoted to the 15th anniversary of his election.

Solovyov interviewed Putin again for another documentary - *World Order 2018* - which was released on social media ahead of the presidential election earlier this year.

At the height of the Ukrainian crisis, Solovyov expressed sympathy for the pro-Russian militias in eastern Ukraine and accused Ukrainian armed forces of committing crimes similar to those of Nazi Germany.

He is also known for his criticism of opposition leader Alexei Navalny and Russian liberals, whom he often describes as "liberasts" (a conflation of "liberal" and "pederast").

In October 2017, prominent Ekho Moskvyy radio journalist Ksenia Larina temporarily left Russia over concerns for her security after she and Solovyov traded accusations about remarks by Larina blaming an atmosphere of intolerant nationalism for a knife attack on her fellow Ekho Moskvyy journalist Tatiana Felgengauer.

3.2 Olga Skabeyeva

Journalist and TV presenter Skabeyeva, 33, is, perhaps, one of Rossiya 1's most recognisable faces and voices, [nicknamed by critics](#) the "iron doll of Putin TV".



She came to prominence in 2012-2013 with her coverage of the Pussy Riot trial, the surge in anti-government rallies at the time and subsequent criminal investigations into the activities of Russian opposition supporters.

Her critical reports about the Russian opposition [prompted TV critic Petrovskaya](#) to describe her as a member of Russian state TV's "special operation forces", and her tone as "prosecutorial and accusatory".

In 2015-2016, she hosted her own current affairs talk show Vesti.doc on Rossiya 1 before launching 60 Minutes with her husband, Yevgeny Popov.

Skabeyeva has at times directly provoked figures considered hostile to Kremlin interests.

In one highly publicised altercation, she goaded Hajo Seppelt - a journalist from German public broadcaster ARD who made a series of films revealing details of Russia's doping programme – by bombarding him with one-sided questions until he lost his temper and physically bundled her out the room.

3.3 Yevgeny Popov

Originally a local journalist in Vladivostok, in Russia's Far East, Popov, 39, has become one of Rossiya 1's top correspondents and presenters.

Over the past 18 years, Popov has worked in a variety of roles at the state-owned All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, or VGTRK, media holding that controls Rossiya 1, including as its Ukraine correspondent and New York bureau chief.

He is, however, perhaps best known for his coverage of the two revolutions in Ukraine - in 2003 and 2014 - and documentaries targeting the Kremlin's opponents.

One such film - The Browder Effect - was widely criticised for using apparently fake documents as evidence of opposition politician Alexei Navalny's links with foreign intelligence services (<http://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/m1cz783z>).

In 2013, he married his colleague, Olga Skabeyeva, with whom he now presents 60 Minut on Rossiya 1.

An unnamed source in VGTRK told independent magazine The New Times he was "an absolute soldier of the party and the government, who rigidly executes orders coming from above".

3.4 Roman Babayan

A long-standing presenter of Pravo Golosa on Centre TV, Roman Babayan, 50, first came to prominence as a military correspondent on state TV.

Since the start of his career in journalism in 1993, he has worked as a state TV reporter in numerous hotspots, including Chechnya, Georgia, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Yugoslavia and Iraq.

In 2010, he became presenter of the newly launched Pravo Golosa show, a position he occupies to this day.

In November 2016, Babayan found himself in the media spotlight after he threw his papers at a Polish guest who made an uncomplimentary remark about Russians, prompting a scuffle involving various guests. TV Centre later cancelled the broadcast of the episode.

In 1994, Babayan was awarded Russia's Order for Personal Courage for his work as a military correspondent, and in 2000, he received a Nato medal for his coverage of the alliance's peacekeeping operation in Kosovo.

3.5 Andrei Norkin

A veteran radio presenter and media manager, Norkin, 49, currently hosts Mesto Vstrechi on pro-Kremlin NTV with fellow journalist Olga Belova.

He started his journalistic career in the early 1990s as a newsreader and radio presenter before joining NTV in 1996.

Norkin left the channel in April 2001 in protest against the takeover by Russia's state energy giant Gazprom that transformed it into an outlet loyal to the Kremlin.

After that, he worked in a variety of roles on several TV channels and radio stations, including Kommersant FM, RTVI and Public TV (OTR), before returning to NTV in 2014.

Since 2015, Norkin has been head of news and presenter on ultra-conservative and nationalist internet channel Tsargrad TV.

Since his return to NTV, Norkin has become notorious for adopting a confrontational style with some guests.

In 2015, [liberal journalist Ksenia Sobchak](#) tweeted "I'm in hell" when Norkin encouraged other guests and audience members to gang up on her for criticising Russia's support for separatists in eastern Ukraine.

In February 2018, Norkin started a fistfight with [Ukrainian studio guest Dmitry Suvorov](#).

3.6 Anatoly Kuzichev

Producer and TV presenter Kuzichev, 49, once described himself as [a "fighter for his own country"](#), rather than a journalist.

Having served in the Soviet Navy for three years in the late 1980s, Kuzichev started his career as a radio presenter in 1993.

In the late 1990s - early 2000s, he hosted information and entertainment shows on a number of TV stations, including Channel One.

Kuzichev joined VGTRK in 2007 and was involved in the launch of its Vesti FM radio station, where he later served as chief producer.

Between 2014 and 2016, Kuzichev worked as chief producer of the Kommersant FM radio station and presented a programme called Radio Kuzichev on Tsargrad TV.

In January 2017, Kuzichev became a co-presenter of the Vremya Pokazhet show on Channel One, where he had previously featured as a guest expert.

Asked about his personal political views in one TV interview, Kuzichev [told author Zakhar Prilepin](#) that he had thought of himself as a "Kremlin bot and imperialist" since his time in the navy.

3.7 Artyom Sheynin

Known for his aggressive style, Sheynin, 52, is, perhaps, one of the most controversial presenters of state TV talk shows.

He has worked in a variety of roles with prominent TV presenter Vladimir Pozner since 2000.

In August 2016, he replaced Pyotr Tolstoy as a co-presenter of the Vremya Pokazhet talk show, following Tolstoy's election to the State Duma.

Previously he was a regular commentator on the same show.

[TV critic Petrovskaya has described](#) his manner as that of a "boy from the backstreets".

He has on numerous occasions bullied and even assaulted foreign and liberal studio guests.



During the 2018 presidential campaign, Sheynin and his co-host Kuzichev mocked liberal candidate Sobchak for describing Russia's elections as unfair and criticising widespread corruption and lavish lifestyles among the political elite.

In October 2017, he grabbed regular US commentator Michael Bohm by the scruff of the neck before being ushered quietly away by another studio guest (<https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c1dmo8iw>).

Talking about his style as a presenter, [Sheynin admitted](#) in one TV interview that he sometimes goes "too far", but said he had never done so on purpose.

4. GUESTS

The current affairs talk shows on pro-Kremlin TV feature a variety of regular guests who can be roughly divided into two groups – the "establishment" and "outsiders", who represent or express views that diverge to a greater or lesser extent from the Kremlin position. The former are usually senior Russian officials, veteran politicians, journalists, members of the Russian parliament and pundits. They generally back Russian foreign policy and attack the West.

Alternative standpoints are represented by guests from abroad, including Russian-speakers dubbed as Western commentators, and a handful of liberal commentators and marginal opposition figures. Participants who criticise the government or come from a state perceived as hostile are often hectored or ridiculed by presenters and fellow panellists.

Below is a list of notable guests from both ends of the spectrum.

4.1 'ESTABLISHMENT' FIGURES

a) Officials and politicians

- Maria Zakharova: The official Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, known for her vehemently anti-Western rhetoric. She is a frequent guest on Rossiya 1's 60 Minut and Vecher s Vladimirom Solovyovym.
- Vladimir Zhirinovskiy: The veteran leader of the nationalist LDPR party, known for his confrontational style and anti-Western remarks. He also makes frequent appearances on 60 Minut and Voskresny Vecher s Vladimirom Solovyovym.
- Gennady Zyuganov: The veteran leader of the Communist Party. A regular guest on the 60 Minut show, Zyuganov often praises Russia's foreign policy, including the annexation of Crimea. Occasionally, he makes critical comments about the government's domestic policy, but always stops short of criticising Putin.
- Alexei Pushkov: TV presenter and head of the Federation Council (upper house of parliament) information policy commission. A prolific Twitter user and frequent guest of Solovyov's Voskresny Vecher, he is known for his anti-Western stance and criticism of US policy towards Russia.
- Leonid Kalashnikov: Chairman of the State Duma (lower house of parliament) committee for CIS, Eurasian integration and compatriot affairs. A member of the Communist Party, Kalashnikov is a vocal critic of the Ukrainian authorities and Russian liberals, and often engages in heated arguments with Ukrainian and pro-Western guests.

- Olga Kovitidi: A member of the Federation Council committee for security and defence and a former member of the Russia-backed administration of Crimea. A frequent guest on the Vremya Pokazhet show, Kovitidi cleaves closely to the Kremlin line on Ukraine and Western sanctions and often praises Putin's leadership.

- Frants Klintsevich: A member of the Federation Council committee for defence and security and a regular panellist on Channel One and Rossiya 1's shows. Klintsevich recently lost the post of deputy chairman of the defence committee amid rumours that his statements were out of line with the official position of the Defence Ministry.

- Alexander Khinshtein: A prominent journalist, advisor to the director of the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) and former State Duma deputy. During his career in journalism, Khinshtein penned a number of exposes about high-profile figures, including the late tycoon and Kremlin critic Boris Berezovsky. During the 2018 presidential campaign, he praised Putin on state TV talk shows and released a book claiming that the USSR would have survived had Putin been in charge.

b) Journalists and commentators

- Margarita Simonyan: Editor-in-chief of the Kremlin-controlled international broadcaster RT (also known as Russia Today) and news agency Sputnik. A regular guest on leading talk shows, Simonyan often holds forth on criticism of Russia's foreign-facing media in the West.

- Sergei Strokan: A foreign affairs specialist at the Kommersant publishing house. Strokan is a regular guest on Vremya Pokazhet, Pravo Golosa and Mesto Vstrechi. He primarily comments on foreign affairs, usually criticising the US leadership and its policy towards Russia.

- Alexander Gurnov: A political commentator with state-funded news channel RT. A frequent guest on Pravo Golosa and Mesto Vstrechi, Gurnov usually comments on international relations, attacking US and UK policy towards Russia.

- Sergei Kurginyan: A political analyst and leader of the nationalist Essence of Time movement. An admirer of Joseph Stalin, Kurginyan is regularly invited on shows to talk about perceived "Russophobia" in the West. He criticises the Ukrainian leadership and praises Putin. Discussing a Putin speech on Vremya Pokazhet, he described the president as a "messianic" figure who will take the country to new heights.

- Zakhar Prilepin: A Russian nationalist author who has fought alongside rebels in eastern Ukraine and an adviser to Oleksandr (Alexander) Zakharchenko, head of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic.

- Sergei Markov: The pro-Kremlin director of the Institute for Political Studies and a regular guest of Pravo Golosa and Mesto Vstrechi. He is a vocal critic of the Ukrainian authorities, whom he describes as a "junta" and "puppets" of the US.

- Vladimir Sergiyenko: Germany-based Russian-Ukrainian author and radio-presenter. A frequent guest on Pravo Golosa, Sergiyenko is a staunch critic of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the EU.

- Gevorg Mirzayan; An associate professor in politics at the Russian government's Financial University. He often hits out at US foreign policy and Ukraine. A supporter of the annexation of Crimea, Mirzayan argues with foreign panellists and is fond of describing the US as a "declining" superpower.

- Oleg Barabanov: A political scientist and director of the Kremlin-sponsored Valdai Discussion Club programme. A regular on Mesto Vstrechi and Pravo Golosa, he is particularly outspoken about the Ukrainian leadership and the UK, which he has called on air "Russia's eternal old enemy".

- Karen Shakhnazarov: One of only a few filmmakers to make regular appearances on leading political discussion shows. A diehard Putin supporter, he often attacks Kiev, the US and Nato and praises Russia's foreign policy.

4.2 THE 'OPPOSITION'

a) Foreign guests

- Maxim Yali: A senior researcher in history at the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences and regular guest on 60 Minut, Vremya Pokazhet and Pravo Golosa. Yali usually expresses a pro-Ukrainian point of view and is often interrupted or ignored by presenters.

- Jakub Korejba: A Polish commentator and former researcher at the Foreign Ministry-run elite Moscow Institute of International Relations. A regular guest on Russian TV, Korejba lost his job at Newsweek Polska - the Polish edition of Newsweek - in 2014 after he [penned an article in the Russian media](#) in which he accused Poland of helping to overthrow then Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich.

- Vyacheslav Kovtun: A Ukrainian political analyst and a regular fixture on Russian state TV. Kovtun expresses pro-Ukrainian views and is often mocked by presenters. On several occasions over the past few years, he has been punched by fellow studio guests both on and off the air. In 2016, a nationalist from the Russian SERB movement threw a cake at Kovtun outside the Ostankino TV studios in Moscow.

- Vadym Tryukhan: A former diplomat and chairman of the board of the European Movement of Ukraine. Tryukhan backs the Ukrainian government position during discussion programmes and often engages in heated arguments with other studio guests and presenters.

- Roman Tsymbalyuk: A Moscow-based Ukrainian journalist who is best known for challenging Putin about Russia's involvement in the Donbass at the president's annual press conferences. Tsymbalyuk is one of the less regular Ukrainian guests on Russian TV and openly criticises the Russian authorities and their policy towards Ukraine. Tsymbalyuk has said [he appears on Russian talk shows](#) to reach out to residents of the rebel-held Donbass, who can only watch pro-Kremlin TV.

- Volodymyr Oliynyk (Vladimir Oleynik): A former senior member of the Ukrainian parliament from the pro-Russian Party of the Regions of ousted President Viktor Yanukovich and co-founder of the Committee for the Salvation of Ukraine. On Russian state TV, Oliynyk criticises the current Ukrainian authorities and fiercely debates fellow panellists.
 - Zygmunt Dzieciolowski: A Polish journalist who is regularly invited to take part in the 60 Minut show. In 2017, the editor-in-chief of RT, Margarita Simonyan, threatened to sue him for defamation after Dzieciolowski accused the channel of spreading [conspiracy theories about the MH17 crash](#), but she never did so.
 - Michael Bohm: A former columnist of the Moscow Times and Russian political talk shows' most prominent American guest. Like Ukrainian panellists, Bohm is regularly shut down and mocked by presenters. On one occasion in 2017, he was physically assaulted by Vremya Pokazhet host Sheynin.
 - Mark Nuckols: A Moscow-based American law and business teacher. In autumn 2017, he replaced Bohm as the main American guest on Vremya Pokazhet. Nuckols defends US foreign policy and regularly criticises Trump.
 - Greg Vayner: Introduced as a "US political commentator", Vayner's real name is Grigory Vinnikov and he was born in St Petersburg, although he worked as a travel agent in New York for a time. He makes regular appearances on Mesto Vstrechi, Pravo Golosa and 60 Minut, where he is asked to interpret Trump's actions for the Russian audience and is routinely ridiculed by presenters and guests.
 - Tomasz Maciejczuk: A Polish journalist and permanent fixture on state TV chat shows. Described by some pro-Kremlin media as a "Russophobe", Maciejczuk is known for his harsh criticism of Russia. In April 2017, he provoked a fistfight on Mesto Vstrechi by calling Soviet soldiers "red fascists". In May 2018, he was banned from entering Russia for 30 years, a move he described as [politically motivated](#).
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b) Liberals

- Sergei Stankevich: A politician and chairman of the international relations committee of the small non-parliamentary Party of Growth. An ally of Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s, he fell out of favour after supporting a rival presidential campaign and went into exile in Poland after facing criminal prosecution. He returned after the charges against him were dropped. On political talk shows, he often criticises Trump and the authorities in Kiev.
- Dmitry Nekrasov: An expert from the Civil Initiatives Committee - a think tank founded by the Kremlin loyalist but economically liberal former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin. Nekrasov is a regular guest on Pravo Golosa and 60 Minut, where he laments the state of Russia's economy and talks about oil prices. On one occasion, he suggested that Russia should join Nato to ease tension with the West, but was shouted down by other guests and the presenter.
- Boris Nadezhdin: A former State Duma member and one-time adviser of murdered opposition politician Boris Nemtsov. Nadezhdin describes himself as a liberal. On state TV he often makes sarcastic remarks about the Ukrainian leadership and sometimes praises Putin.

- Leonid Gozman: A former member of the defunct liberal Union of Right Forces/Right Cause party and a veteran guest of TV talk shows. In an interview with Voice of America, he called the atmosphere the "quintessence of hate" but said he continued to attend to stand up for those who are ["tired of lawlessness" in Russia](#).

- Vladimir Ryzhkov: A former State Duma deputy and chairman of Russia's Choice - the main pro-Kremlin party in the early 1990s. Ryzhkov spoke at the opposition protests in 2012 and 2013. A regular guest on talk shows as a representative of the "liberal camp", Ryzhkov highlights shortcomings in the electoral system and the domestic situation but stops short of criticising Putin personally.

- Grigory Amnuel: A film and theatre director who is regularly invited onto state TV programmes. Amnuel described himself in one interview as [the "most convenient enemy"](#) on Russian political talk shows. Similar to other guests who espouse pro-Western views, he is often interrupted.

5. MANIPULATION

The current affairs talk shows use various methods to popularise the Kremlin line while giving the appearance of genuine debate.

Tools and techniques range from presentation tricks to the choice and treatment accorded to studio guests.

5.1 Selective approach

At first glance, the talk shows seem to represent a wide range of views - from pro-Western and liberal to ultra-conservative.

In an online interview, presenter Babayan said that ["at least half" the guests on Pravo Golosa](#) had a point of view that "does not coincide with the stance of the Russian state and they can easily express it".

But the treatment of guests on air and the fact that pro-Kremlin positions invariably take precedence over dissenting points of view suggest that this apparent pluralism is often little more than an elaborate show.

In a typical example, speakers representing the "Ukrainian side" on 60 Minut on 16 January - journalist Tsymbalyuk and pundit Tryukhan - were repeatedly interrupted and contradicted by the presenters, at times aggressively.

[Interjections by the presenters included](#): "Stop making it up", "What Roman just said is absolute nonsense" and "So we [Russians] are aggressors but let us carry on regardless".

On NTV's Mesto Vstrechi on 23 March "US commentator" Vayner described the UK as a "centuries-old" parliamentary system. His statement was greeted with derision by the studio audience and he was repeatedly cut off by presenter Olga Belova.

"So you are trying to persuade us that they [the UK] are an enlightened democracy and we are wild barbarians?" she [said in a typical retort](#).

Since the start of the TV season in September 2017, Vayner has also been repeatedly interrupted and mocked on Vecheer s Vladimirom Solovyovym and Pravo Golosa.

5.2 Bullying and intimidation

The pressure put on certain guests at times escalates into shouting and even physical intimidation.

In one well-publicised incident, pundit Amnuel was harangued after he suggested that a late Ukrainian rebel fighter was a "murderer".

His remarks sparked an angry reaction from a guest sitting next to him, as well as from presenter Sheynin, who yelled at a visibly stunned Amnuel: "I too have killed, so what?"

The presenter later [accused Amnuel of twisting the facts](#) and refused to let him finish his sentence.

Occasionally, the altercations turn physical.

In October 2017, Sheynin cuffed regular US commentator Bohm on the back of the head and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck (<https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c1dmo8iw>).

Bohm later described Sheynin's behaviour as "loutish" and "disgraceful", and he boycotted Vremya Pokazhet for a while afterwards.

In February, presenter Norkin [threw a punch at](#) Ukrainian guest Dmitry Suvorov after the latter called another participant expressing a pro-Kremlin view a "bastard".

In general, shouting and fights appear to be a particular feature of daytime shows.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a Channel One employee told investigative magazine The Insider in July 2017 that the goal of daytime programmes is to stir emotions rather than make the viewer think.

"Why is everyone shouting at each other during the show? Our viewers are primarily housewives who are at home in the afternoon and they do not need philosophising, explanations or in-depth analysis, their TV works in the background while they make lunch or eat it," [the source said](#).

He also said guests were chosen for their "shoutiness".

5.3 Onscreen messages and calls

Internet trolls and bots have become a well-known element of online information warfare.

They also feature on at least one of the top Russian political talk shows.

In June 2017 Vremya Pokazhet presenter Kuzichev rejected claims by media and online activists that the show was using bots to control tweets from viewers.

But research by BBC Monitoring at the time suggested that many, if not most, of the accounts shown during three episodes of Vremya Pokazhet were not from genuine members of the public (<https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c1djikcz>).

The analysis also found that the overwhelming majority of tweets shown echoed the programme's pro-Kremlin line.

5.4 Fake news

Information contained in talk shows has also been misinterpreted, distorted or invented.

In one of the most striking examples, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zakharova made reference to a fake picture showing Osama Bin Laden meeting Hillary Clinton at the White House at a time when the US was - according to Zakharova - trying to present him as a "democratic force".

"Remember those fantastic, fascinating pictures when Osama Bin Laden was received in the White House," [she told the presenters of 60 Minut](#), adding that "this is classic lobbyism".

In fact, the picture is one of Clinton meeting Indian musician Shubhashish Mukherjee, with Bin Laden's face digitally superimposed over Mukherjee's, and was first propagated by Trump supporters in the 2016 presidential election

Following a media backlash, Zakharova said her remarks referred to Bin Laden's supporters and associates rather than the al-Qaeda founder himself.

Information appears sometimes to be exaggerated or twisted to increase tension in the studio or to support the official Russian line.

In September 2017, a new Ukrainian law making Ukrainian the required language of study in state schools was widely presented by guests as "ethnocide" and a ban on the use of Russian in schools.

Duma deputy Leonid Kalashnikov told 60 Minut on 27 September that it equated to "genocide of Russians, real and actual genocide".

Some details of another widely discussed topic, the poisoning of the Skripals, have been misreported.

A 60 Minut presenter said on 10 April that Yulia Skripal had refused to talk to Russian journalists or representatives of the Russian state, and quoted the BBC as reporting that she would hold a press conference "very soon".

"At the presser, Yulia Skripal is unlikely to blame London for anything," host Skabeyeva said, predicting that Russia would be blamed.

In fact, Skripal refused to talk to any journalists - and the BBC did not report that she was going to give a news conference.

But the errors were repeated by co-host Popov in the next edition of the show.

SOURCE: BBC MONITORING 9 JUL 18

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