

The Litvinenko Assassination Case: through the Theoretical Frameworks of Gatekeeping, Agenda Setting and Framing

Дело Литвиненко через призму журналистских расследований

Литвиненко ісі журналистік зерттеу призмасында

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Abstract. This article is dedicated to the investigation of Alexander Litvinenko assassination, a former FSB officer, through the prism of the media. Using the concept of the process of predicting and generating published media content based on the theoretical frameworks of gatekeeping and agenda setting the authors of the article try to present the formed image of Litvinenko in the press. Evaluation of media materials was based on the nature of the arguments presented, proving one or another point of view. For example: accusation of involvement of the Russian authorities in the murder of Litvinenko; denial of involvement of Russian authorities in the murder of Litvinenko; Litvinenko's circle: versions of the murder, assessment of these versions; image of Litvinenko; other estimates of events. Analysis of the books of famous journalists puts forward different versions of the death of a former FSB officer. As you know, among the many speculations about Litvinenko's possible killers and their motives, the topic of the Russian president's involvement in the Litvinenko case turned out to be the most controversial and at the same time widely discussed. The news coverage of this case was so intense that it left its influence in the world press.

KEYWORDS Alexander Litvinenko, assassination, polonium-210, death, poisoning, gatekeeping, agenda setting

Аннотация. Эта статья посвящена расследованию убийства Александра Литвиненко, бывшего сотрудника ФСБ, через призму СМИ. Используя концепцию процесса прогнозирования и генерирования публикуемого медиа-контента на основе теоретических основ управления и постановки повестки дня, авторы статьи пытаются представить сформированный образ Литвиненко в прессе. Оценка материалов СМИ основывалась на характере представленных аргументов, обосновывающих ту или иную точку зрения. Например: обвинение в причастности российских властей к убийству Литвиненко; отрицание причастности российских властей к убийству Литвиненко; версии убийства, оценка этих версий; образ Литвиненко; другие оценки событий. Анализ книг известных журналистов выдвигает различные версии смерти бывшего сотрудника ФСБ. Как вы знаете, среди множества предположений о возможных убийцах Литвиненко и их мотивах тема участия российского президента в деле Литвиненко оказалась наиболее противоречивой и в то же время широко обсуждаемой. Освещение этого дела было настолько интенсивным, что оно оставило свое влияние в мировой прессе.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА Александр Литвиненко, убийство, полоний-210, смерть, отражение, контроль, постановка повестки дня.

Аңдатпа. Бұл мақала бұрынғы ФСБ қызметкері Александр Литвиненконың өлімін Б АҚ-тың призмасы арқылы тергеуге арналған. Мақаланың авторлары Литвиненконың қалы

птасқан бейнесін басқарудың теориялық негіздеріне сүйене отырып, жарияланған медиа-м азмұнды болжау және құру процесінің тұжырымдамасын қолдана отырып тырысады. БАҚ материалдарын бағалау осы немесе басқа көзқарасты негіздейтін дәлелдердің сипатына негізделді. Мысалы: Ресей билігінің Литвиненконың өліміне қатысы бар деп айыптау; Ресей билігінің Литвиненконың өліміне қатысы жоқтығы; өлтіру нұсқасы, осы нұсқаларды бағалау; Литвиненконың бейнесі; оқиғаның басқа рейтингтері. Әйгілі журналистердің кітаптарын талдау кезінде ФСБ-нің бұрынғы қызметкерінің қайтыс болуының түрлі нұсқалары келтірілген. Литвиненконың ықтимал өлтірушілері мен олардың себептері туралы көптеген болжамдардың ішінде Ресей президентінің Литвиненко ісіне қатысуы тақырыбы ең даулы және сонымен бірге кең талқыланғанын білесіздер. Бұл істің жариялануы соншалықты күшті болғандықтан, ол әлемдік баспасөзде өз әсерін қалдырды.

Кілт сөздер. Александр Литвиненко, кісі өлтіру, полоний-210, улану, бақылау, күн тәртібін құру.

Introduction

Over a decade passed since the death of Alexander Litvinenko, but the interest of the world community in this matter does not wane. On the contrary, after Skripal's poisoning in Britain, it was impossible not to draw parallels with the case of Litvinenko. Although from the foreign policy standpoint, the “Litvinenko case” did not improve Russia's image. For Russia, it remained exclusively a factor in foreign policy, since the consequences of this story did not have a serious impact on the internal political situation. This was confirmed by a statement by Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in an interview with Euronews channel that the results of the British investigation into the case of former FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko were based only on assumptions and were of no value. “You’ve mentioned some report by some retired judge, in which (I just took a look out of interest) practically every paragraph and each section opens with the word “probably”. What is there to comment on? It is an unofficial report by a retired person who offers his personal judgment. We, too, can write a lot of such reports or ask our former judges or academics to prepare some papers. They have no value whatsoever and so there will be no reaction to this” said Medvedev.

However, Litvinenko’s assassination took its place in the annals of the Western media narrative. Over the course of the years, there were numerous books and documentaries concerning this case. For some, this assassination still seems mysterious, whereas others confidently call the murderers and those who could have ordered it.

In a number of influential Western media, the very day after the death of Litvinenko, the outline of the main suspect, the Russian government, personified in the image of Vladimir Putin, began to emerge clearly. During the first month after the death of the former FSB officer, the press began to form a strong opinion that the Russians have already lost the PR battle for who is responsible for this murder.

Alexander Litvinenko was a former Soviet and Russian state security agent who specialized in tackling organized crime. In 1998, he publicly accused his superiors in ordering the assassination of the Russian business oligarch Boris Berezovsky. He and his family were granted asylum in UK, after he fled Russia in 2000 as a result of several criminal charges against him. In Britain Litvinenko published two books, *Blowing up Russia: Terror from Within* and *Lubyanka Criminal Group*. In the first books he accused the Russian secret service FSB in guiding the 1999 apartment bombing in major Russian cities as means of justifying the Second Chechnya War (Felshtinsky Y., Litvinenko, 2017). The second book is dedicated to the transformation of FSB into a criminal organization, where the author writes about President Vladimir Putin along with other FSB officers having been involved in organized crime that was responsible for covering up drug traffic from Afghanistan (Litvinenko A., 2002). Litvinenko also accused Putin of assassination Russian journalist and human rights activist,

Anna Politkovskaya in October of 2006. Litvinenko suddenly fell ill on November 1, 2006. He was hospitalized with acute abdominal pain, diarrhea, and vomiting in the local hospital two days later. Litvinenko told doctors that he suspected that he was poisoned and showed some signs of radiation poisoning as hair loss and low white cell blood count (Nathwani A., 2016). However the readings of a Geiger counter passed over his body were negative. The BBC reported that it was by pure chance that such a rare element as Polonium-210 was discovered in his samples, making Litvinenko the first known victim of acute radiation syndrome that was induced by this particle. He passed away in November 23 of the same year as a result of poisoning by radioactive polonium-210.

The public inquiry of the case, set up by the British government, opened at the Royal Courts of Justice in London in January 2015. Its conclusion was reported a year later, on 21 January, that Alexander Litvinenko's murder was "probably" approved by President Putin (Economist, 2016).

The images of the victim on his deathbed shocked the international public. Furthermore, with such dramatic elements as ex-secret service agents and exotic poisoning with radioactive particles, Litvinenko's case could not go unnoticed by the global media. Another reason for the case's attractiveness for the media is its narrative qualities with the clearly identifiable victim and several suspected "villains" who stood behind the murder. Because of that the story can be easily fitted into different media frameworks and presented in different lights according to the immediate needs. It helps various media bring back Litvinenko's case keeping it relevant to the political zeitgeist. Therefore it is reasonable to look at who and how the information war was waged, what forms it took, what arguments the media used to support their positions.

Methodology

Mass media has the function of selecting and framing messages and events in one light or another. Therefore various media theories help the process of understanding and navigating the complex information environment. Litvinenko's case fits the concepts and various sub-genres of the gatekeeping process of the international news flow. Therefore, they are divided into three groups that correspond to the following theoretical frameworks:

- Gatekeeping
- Agenda Setting and Framing

The gatekeeping theory explains the process of events transforming into the news. It defines five concepts of the process that predict and shape the published media content: personal values, media routines, organizational influences, extra-media influences, and ideology. As a result of attempts to model and conceptualize the process of international news flow several sub-genres of the theory have emerged. They are deviance; journalists as agents for the audience; organizational resources and market factors; core zones of the world system. These sub-genres are tightly interlinked and complementary to each other. Therefore it is almost impossible to examine any particular newsworthy events using only one of them as an analytic tool.

News media fulfilling a basic function of being a watchdog for the society, often result from discovering the deviance from the social norms. And the four of the basic news criteria such as novelty, conflict, prominence, and sensationalism contain some degree of deviance. The poisoning case can be categorized as normative deviance, the extent to which the event if it occurred in the U.S. or any other country for this matter, would have broken the norms of the society. Moreover, the exotic nature of poisoning can be classified both as novel and sensational which increased the probability of it being transformed into international news.

Literature Review

Litvinenko's assassination was a subject of numerous investigative journalistic articles, academic papers, and even theatre plays and films. The most popular theories connect the Litvinenko's case with the chain of other assassination attempts such as poisoning by dioxin of Ukrainian then-presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko in 2004 and shooting of oppositional journalist Anna Politkovskaya in 2006. However, investigators specializing in Intelligence history

such as Volodarsky (2009) identify poisoning as signature assassination method of Soviet regime that go decades back with poisoning of the Soviet defector Nikolai Khokhlov in Frankfurt in 1957 by radioactive thallium or the Bulgarian dissident writer Georgi Ivanov Markov who was poisoned by a ricin pellet shot into his leg by an umbrella in London in 1978.

In contrast to the notion that Litvinenko's poisoning might be just one case among many others, British investigative journalist Luke Harding (2016) argues that the assassination has larger political significance in the Russian relationships with the west. Harding states that the case indicates the beginning of geopolitical disruptions that resulted in Russia's covert war in Ukraine, the annexation of the Crimea, and conflicts in Syria. If Volodarsky connected the poisoning with the earlier case that took place decades ago, Harding shows how the murder foreshadowed the more recent killings of Russian oppositionists. In his book, the author follows the deadly trail of the radioactive poison that left traces all over London but goes as far back as Kremlin.

Cowell (2008) provides another detailed reconstruction of the assassination and other occasions when assassins tried to kill Litvinenko prior to the event. In the book unlike many theories that declare that poisoning was a demonstrative act, Cowell argues that the initial intention behind the murder was not to leave any traces. He writes "What was not generally known on the day that Alexander Litvinenko died was that the polonium had been discovered only in one of the final urine samples taken from him. If the [British] Ministry of Defense scientists at Aldermaston had not run the extremely unusual tests when they did, it is conceivable that the nature of the poisoning would have remained a mystery, as Litvinenko's killers surely intended it to be. . ."

Another notable book about the case was written by Litvinenko's wife Marina Litvinenko and his closest friend a human rights activist Alexander Goldfarb (2007). The book, which was published right after the tragic events, covers the life and death circumstances of Alexander Litvinenko and explicitly states that FSB received direct orders from Vladimir Putin. However, the main focus of the book is a coup staged by a former KGB general Alexander Kozhakov in 1996 that put Putin in power while strengthening the position of Russian state-security services. The critics of the book such as Nicholas Blinkoe note that Litvinenko's murder does not take sufficient place and it focuses more on Goldfarb's own memoirs who could not be completely objective since he has himself employed by Boris Berezovsky. Blinkoe also suggests that Berezovsky was the instigator of Putin's rise to power, hence there was no KBG ordered coup d'etat, as it is implied in the book.

Researchers such as Yasmeen Mohuiddin affirm the fact that the former Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky was the mastermind behind Putin's presidential appointment since he had close ties with Russia's first president Boris Yeltsin (2007). In her article, Mohuiddin asserted that Litvinenko at one point was on Berezovsky payroll. The article also mentions the theories that claim that the poisoning might have been ordered by Berezovsky himself in order to frame Putin.

There are also a number of research articles that do not dive into the cause and effects of the case but rather work through the various features of the Litvinenko's assassination to address their own hypothesis and theories. Ingram (2019) addresses the case to discuss issues of materially oriented work on security. In the article, he argues that establishing the question of a certain event under investigation as a central analytical strategy is a promising way of developing broader insights and tackling the challenges that materially oriented work on security might present. Ingram discusses how polonium 210 start figuring as actant, trace and evidence in the subsequent investigation of the event and connects the case with Bruno Latour's idea of dingpolitik for materially oriented work on security.

Shoham (2018) in his article *Russia's Toxic Legacy* similar to Volodarsky connects poisonings of Litvinenko and Georgi Markov and ties them with the case of Sergei and Yulia Skripal who were poisoned by a synthetic nerve agent Novichok. Shoham examines all three cases that took place on British soil and argues that they collectively represent the Russian legacy.

Discussion

Organizational resources and market factors sub-genre view international news as a product. It assumes that U.S. media operates with a profit motive, and is determined by the costs of the newsgathering while meeting market demands. These costs may include sending of foreign correspondents, as well as translation from the local languages. Litvinenko's poisoning being covered by the British media outlets saved some of the costs for the U.S. media, which could be called the main driving force of global media attention. The costs of news gathering can also explain the fact why the official Russian government view of the case was underrepresented in the western media. The Russian public opinion Litvinenko as a whole was poorly represented during the initial and subsequent news coverage due to the language barrier or geographical distance and occurring costs of overcoming it. The news reporters that did voice the opinion that the Kremlin and Putin's involvement in the killing were not certain, in most of the cases put it at the very end of the articles.

In the context of gatekeeping sub-genre Chang (2000) proposed core zones of the world systems model. In his model, there are three zones of the world – the core, semi-peripheral and peripheral – that are determined by economic, political and social factors. The core zones include U.S., European Union, Western Europe (UK, German, and France), Canada, and Japan. Remaining Western European countries, Russia, China, and other advanced economies belong to the semi-peripheral zone. The rest of the countries are referred to as the peripheral zone.

Even though Litvinenko was from the semi-peripheral zone, the case occurring in one of the core zones, namely Western Europe, greatly increased its possibility of being covered as international news. This is confirmed by the fact that other assassinations of the Russian anti-establishment politicians and activists, who were more prominent in the local political arena, did not receive as much coverage by the international news media as Litvinenko's case did. For example, the murder in the elevator of her house in Moscow of Anna Politkovskaya, who is also known for her opposition to the policies of Vladimir Putin and the Second Chechnya War, received less international coverage. Moreover, the tragic is mostly remembered by its link to Litvinenko's case nowadays. Another case that was similar to Politkovskaya's is the murder of Paul Klebnikov, an American investigative journalist in Russia in 2004. Klebnikov published a book *Godfather of the Kremlin: Boris Berezovsky and the Looting of Russia* in 2000, where he discussed the process of privatization stated by Yeltsin and particularly addressed Berezovsky. Klebnikov was shot on the Moscow street and survived initially only to tragically die in the broke hospital elevator that was taking him to the operating room. Klebnikov's case despite gaining some early media attention slowly died down.

In contrast with these cases, the news coverage on the case was so intensive that it left its influences on British popular culture. For example, from 2013 to 2016 2Magpies Theatre in Nottingham, UK staged *The Litvinenko Project* in order to mark the seventh anniversary of the assassination. The show is a theatrical tea party that is performed in the café spaces and evolves over time. The creators of the project aim to keep the memory of Alexander Litvinenko.

In 2018 award-winning playwright Lucy Prebble adapted Luke Harding's investigative book about the assassination *A Very Expensive Poison: The Definitive Story of the Murder of Litvinenko and Russia's War with the West* for the stage in the Old Vic Theater in London. As the playwright admitted herself, the case caught her attention because "there is all the lurid Bondesque excitement of spies and political corruption and bumbling, strip club-obsessed assassins, but there is also a beautiful quest for truth at its centre, as a good man knowing he is certain to die tries to solve his own murder in that time."

The poisoning also earned a passing reference in a British television comedy sitcom *The Peep Show* that was aired on Channel 4 from 2003 to 2015. The show references Litvinenko in the first episode of series nine in the verbal exchange of two main characters Mark Corrigan and Jeremy Osborne:

“Jeremy: What about going... Litvinenko?”

Mark: Kill him? With polonium?

Jeremy: Not full Litvinenko. Just a little bit of something debilitating in his pasta each night...”

This penetration of the case into the popular culture shows that the general audience has already become familiarized with Litvinenko's name to the degree that it could become a passing reference

that does not need an explanation. Moreover every similar case after that such as poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in 2018 would inevitably be associated with the case of Litvinenko thus keeping it relevant in the collective memory.

Agenda setting is one of the more prominent media theoretical models of the late twentieth century identified first by McCombs and Shaw. Its core concept explores the ability of the news media to influence and shape the salience of topics on the public agenda. The theoretical model suggests how media can be a successful tool to set particular topics in the public mind and to shape what the said public thinks about it (McCombs, 1972). This is done by highlighting the attributes of the issues reported by the news media, also called frames that affect the audiences' perception.

Litvinenko's poisoning and subsequent death immediately spurred several theories about the assassination. The most widespread theory was the Russian government involvement theory that was confirmed by the British Royal Courts of Justice in 2016. However before the official acknowledgement, one of the strongest supports for the theory was the victim's personal statement made two days before his death. In the statement he says: "...You may succeed in silencing one man but the howl of protest from around the world will reverberate, Mr. Putin, in your ears for the rest of your life." It was first published on 25 November, in the article entitled *Why I believe Putin wanted me dead...* by the Mail on Sunday Online.

Russian authorities denied their involvement in the assassination, and Russian media offered a number of alternative theories. One of which was the possibility that Litvinenko's and alongside with that Politkovskaya's deaths were intended to personally embarrass and put under suspicion President Putin. He called Litvinenko's last statement a provocation. This claim was asserted by Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov, who blamed Berezovsky for both Politkovskaya and Litvinenko's assassinations since they were intimately associated with the Chechen cause (Mohuiddin Y., 2007). The former oligarch was not fully cleared from the suspicions even after his own death in 2013.

There were many other circulating theories, some which included involvement of British intelligence services, participation of organized crime of various countries, and accusation that Boris Berezovsky was behind the killing. The media attributed the last theory to Litvinenko's 1998 confession when he confessed that there was a plot to kill Berezovsky and he himself was allegedly commanded to be the assassin but refused to follow the order.

Most of the media coverage of the event was framed in order to confirm the first theory, and all the pieces of evidence pointed to the fact that it was done by Russian secret services. And after the British Royal Courts, the global media theories were focused on the reasons behind a particular nature of the poisoning. Some reporters say that assassination was meant to go undiscovered because polonium-210 is an extremely rare chemical element. Its entire world's legal production occurs in Russia, which consists of 85 grams annually. Most of that polonium is used internally for research and industrial purposes, and only 0.8 grams per year is exported to U.S. companies through a single authorized supplier.¹ Oleg Gordievsky, colonel of the KGB, who was also a secret agent of the British Secret Intelligence Service, made a comment that the poisoners were unaware that technology existed to detect traces left by polonium-210.

As it was asserted earlier agenda setting model is a successful tool of framing what society thinks about the particular events. Another example of this could be British media report that after the highly radioactive nature of poisoning was conformed, it had caused a health alert in London. Over 450 people have contacted the Health Protection Agency (HPA) after its call for anyone who visited same place as the victim, and 18 of them had test in unnamed clinic. This incident illustrates the fulfilling a role of a watchdog for the general public, alerting them about probable dangers even through events as far removed from ordinary lives as political assassinations.

Agenda setting and framing theories are closely linked to the "propaganda model" proposed by Noam Chomsky. The model assumes that news content reflect the interests of media owners, institutions or other powerful actors. Speculations suggest that Litvinenko's slow and painful death

was designed in way to attract media attention and warn both foreign and Russian opposition powers. Paul Joyal, American expert on Russian politics, wrote that “A message has been communicated to anyone who wants to speak out against the Kremlin: “If you do, no matter who you are, where you are, we will find you and we will silence you-in the most horrible way possible”.

Conclusion

Litvinenko’s assassination became a noticeable event in the international media that covers prominent news linked to Russia. The case left its cool print in the popular culture in the form of investigative books, documentaries, and even a live-performance stage show. The analysis of the assassination using the gatekeeping of international news flow shows that the event matches most of the theory’s sub-genres. The implications suggest that the method and place could be tailored to capture media attention. And the media coverage shaped the audience's perception of Russia as a dangerous country that can openly target its victims in other countries.

The analysis of the framing of the event and numerous theories surrounding it shows that media was successful at not only at telling the audience what to think about, and at the same time how to think about the case. However, the question that is still needed to be answered is “Whose interests this news content is reflecting?” And the possible answer for that is that the Russian authorities who are behind the assassination were also the once who captured and set the media agenda.

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