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Abstract

This article is a corpus-assisted discourse study of a medium-sized corpus of journalistic content collected from the Russian-language branch of RT, a Russian government-sponsored news source. A corpus of over 380,000 tokens was collected from online world news reports, business analyses, opinion pieces, culture, science, and sport news reporting containing the word 'Brexit.' It touches on the presentation of Brexit itself, its technical aspects, main actors, the UK and the EU, Theresa May, Boris Johnson and other politicians, and such issues of contention as the situation in Scotland and Northern Ireland, the economy, and migration. Reporting seems fairly shallow: the technicalities of Brexit are mentioned very frequently, but they do not receive much discussion or explanation. RT's commentary relies heavily on quoting politicians or interviewing experts, which may be caused by a lack of first-hand experience with the topic, by respect for expert opinion, or by a desire to improve the network's negative reputation by appeals to professionalism.

Key words: *Brexit, corpus-assisted discourse analysis, evaluation, Russia Today, speech representation*

1. Introduction

Despite its recent nature, the discourse of Brexit has received much scholarly attention (e.g. Cap, 2017; Evans & Menon, 2017; Koller et al., 2019; Musolff, 2017; Outhwaite, 2017; Ridge-Newman et al., 2018; Ruzza & Pejovic, 2019; Zappettini & Krzyżanowski, 2019). It has been studied as a discourse of political crisis (Bennett, 2019; Krzyżanowski, 2019) and has also been seen through the prism of populist studies and as a part of an emerging (pan-European) populist ideology that pits the 'elite' against 'the ordinary people' (Ruzza & Pejovic, 2019). This is unsurprising as the outcomes of Brexit are momentous not only for the UK and the EU. Indeed, the political, social, and especially economic consequences of Brexit are likely to affect many countries in the world.

However, views on Brexit from outside the UK and the EU could benefit from further investigation, as discourses on Brexit might differ from place to place and from source to source. Any discrepancies may not only result from the biases of politicians, journalists, or researchers, but could also be caused by the amount and accuracy of information available to them. That is why this

article examines the outlook on Brexit from the Russian Federation, as reflected in RT,¹ a Russian government-sponsored news agency.

Since RT observed the Brexit events as an outsider, its vision of the events may be different from the ones existing and competing in Britain or the EU, and is possibly distorted. An onlooker from a different country might miss some of the finer nuances and fail to hear some of the quieter voices which would have been noticed by an informed and observant witness in the midst of the Brexit clamor. Certain historical traditions and stereotypes might color the perception of events as well. Past Russian relations with Europe in general and with Britain in particular have been complex and often resulted in a contradictory popular mythology. Thus, a fascination with “merry old England” as a place of tradition, culture, and quality, evidenced, among other things, in the recent “British scientists proved” memes (e.g. British Scientists Proved, ca. 2016) is mixed with memories of historical antagonisms, including several wars and more recent altercations.

RT is a Russian government-sponsored news agency, which is both internationally and domestically oriented. Its reputation is questionable: it has been described as a propagandist mouthpiece of the Russian government (e.g. Bullough, 2013; Richter, 2017), though communication researchers often indicate that such generalizations overlook many nuances and do not apply well to a network that ‘lacks an overarching ideology and associated narratives to propagate’ (Graydon, 2019, p. 86). Rejecting oversimplification of RT’s narratives, scholars have suggested that its strategy is not so much to deliver the message of Russia’s greatness as to “seize discourse” by adapting to changing circumstances and events (Dajani et al., 2019). It has also been claimed that RT provides ‘a surplus of competing narratives, aiming to overwhelm the information space and create general chaos and confusion’ (Graydon, 2019, p. 87). Consequently, it has been called a perfect ‘post-truth’ network (Graydon, 2019, p. 89), ‘appealing to audiences interested in conspiracy theories and counter-hegemonic political discourse’ (Hutchings et al., 2015, p. 653).

With its declared motto of ‘Question More’ (About RT, 2019) and a significant portion of its content consisting of “clickbait” and sensational, apolitical stories (Schafer, 2018) mixed with Russia’s political messages, RT claims to have a very significant presence among the world’s media sources. It reports a total weekly audience of 100 million viewers in 47 out of over 100 countries where RT broadcasts are available, 43 million weekly viewers in 15 European countries, and 11 million weekly viewers in the US. It is present in the Arabic-speaking region and is in the top five most popular international TV channels in ten Latin American countries. It also declares to be the top non-Anglo-Saxon TV news network in terms of online traffic, with over 175 million monthly visits to RT websites in 2019, and to be the number one TV news network on YouTube, with more than ten billion views across its channels and over 16 million subscribers (About RT, 2019). In 2012, RT launched its Russian-language information portal and a 24-hour TV channel broadcast by more than 400 TV operators (O Kanale, 2019).

Besides RT’s visibility among the world’s media, the choice of the source was largely dictated by availability of content. A search for ‘Brexit’ (in Cyrillic) on the sites of more reputable official Russian news agencies, such as ITAR-TASS or RIA Novosti, resulted in a surprisingly low number of hits, and popular social networks, such as VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, or Facebook

showed little discussion of Brexit as well. However, the Russian-language version of *RT.com* contained enough Brexit-themed articles to produce a small, specialized corpus (384,565 tokens) of journalistic content. Similar outcomes are likely to result from other Russian-language users' searches, and it makes sense to analyze the content that is findable on the internet, despite RT's poor reputation.

At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that news media are not mere reflections of public views. It has been noted that they can influence and often shape people's opinions and worldviews (Richardson, 2007; Talbot, 2007). Recognizing the media's capability to mold popular reality, scholars have long argued for the importance of studying media discourse (Richardson, 2007; Talbot, 2007; van Dijk, 2009). Of particular importance for this paper is the point that different ways of verbalizing the same idea could lead to differences in ideological representation of reality (Fairclough, 2001a). Since Russian citizens are outside observers of the Brexit process and as such may be affected only indirectly, if at all, their understanding of Brexit issues and events is mediated and can be shaped by their sources of information.

Given the need to study discursive articulations of various visions of social reality, the focus of this project is the discursive image of Brexit, its agents, causes, and predicted consequences, as created by RT's Russian-language website. The study's value may be seen as exposing the way the Brexit referendum debate and its reactions were discursively framed to the population outside of Britain and the EU, in a state unaffiliated and often competing with both the EU and the UK while remaining their political and economic partner. This study recognizes that discourses are 'diverse representations of social life which are inherently positioned – differently positioned social actors "see" and represent social life in different ways, different discourses' (Fairclough, 2001b, p. 123).

The remainder of the article begins by laying out the theoretical foundations of the project, then describes the corpus built for it, and proceeds to present the frequency and collocation results of the corpus linguistic analysis. The final section aggregates the findings and offers some concluding remarks.

2. Theoretical Foundations

The study follows the corpus-assisted discourse study (CADS) approach, which combines elements of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and corpus linguistics (CL). Several authors have suggested that corpus linguistic methods can effectively support quantitative and qualitative research in discourse analysis (Baker et al., 2008; Brigadir et al., 2015; Mautner, 2009; Partington, 2006). This combination has gained popularity, in part because it reduces subjectivity in research and improves the validity of research through focusing on quantifiable elements of discourse. Benefitting from both the rigor of the computer-assisted inspection and the richness of subsequent qualitative examination, recent CADS studies for instance examine collocations to reveal ideological information about the groups under analysis (Baker & McEnery, 2005; Baker et al., 2012; Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Knoblock, 2017, 2020; Orpin, 2005; Perren & Dannreuther, 2013; Prentice & Hardie, 2009; Salama, 2011).

Some of the most common CADS techniques are generating frequency lists, keyness analysis, and collocation and collocation analysis. Frequency of particular words in corpora can provide insights about the salience of certain terms and topics in the discourse under analysis, while frequency results can be used to draw conclusions about the correlation between the structures of the text and social and political phenomena. Keyness, is the statistically significantly higher frequency of words or multi-word expressions in the target corpus in comparison with a general reference corpus. As such, it also highlights the topic and the central content elements of a corpus (Baker et al., 2008). Concordance lines or key-words-in-context (KWICs) present the key word or cluster in its immediate co-text and allow the context of the discourse to be taken into account (Baker et al., 2008). Collocation is the above-chance frequent co-occurrence of two words within a pre-determined span, usually five words on either side of the word under investigation (the node) (Sinclair, 2003). Besides lexical collocation, it is possible to draw meaningful conclusions from observing which grammatical structures containing the keywords are used: ‘Collostructional analysis always starts with a particular construction and investigates which lexemes are strongly attracted or repelled by a particular slot in the construction’ (Stefanowitsch & Gries, 2003, p. 214). It is a step beyond the general collocation analysis as it takes grammar into consideration and groups collocations according to particular grammatical relations, such as subject, object, modifier, etc. (Kilgarriff et al., 2004). The collostructional analysis was conducted with the help of Sketch Engine’s word sketch tool.

CADS is often conducted on ‘ad hoc specialized corpora, since, very frequently, there is no existing collection of the discourse type that is under investigation’ (Partington, 2010, p. 90). This was the case with the RT Brexit corpus.

3. Data and Methodology

To compile the study corpus, I used RT’s sub-topic label ‘Brexit’ and gathered all articles coming up on <https://russian.rt.com/tag/brexit>. Despite being primarily an English-language source, RT maintains a Russian-language branch, which is reflected in the web address used for data collection (*russian.rt.com* rather than *rt.com*). The initial collection was done in September 2019, when 1000 articles, i.e. the maximum number of articles displayed at a time, were scraped. After Brexit was finalized in 2020, additional collection was carried out to add articles published between September 2019 and January 31, 2020. Altogether, the corpus contains materials from March 2017 to January 2020. It was manually cleaned from English text or an occasional piece of code that was scraped by mistake. The resulting corpus consists of 384,565 tokens, which is small by corpus-linguistic standards, but acceptable for investigation of special topics (Almut, 2010), and log Dice statistic employed by Sketch Engine for collocation calculation scales well on different corpus sizes (Rychlý, 2008).

The corpus was investigated with the help of the corpus management software Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2004), largely because it can lemmatize Russian texts and tag them for parts of speech. To bring out essential features of RT’s Brexit discourse, I first identified its most frequent

lemmas, then its keywords. Keyness was assessed by comparing the RT Brexit corpus to the ruTenTen corpus (Jakubíček et al., 2013), a large corpus of Russian texts (over 18 billion tokens) initially collected from the web in 2011, cleaned and deduplicated, with additional cleaning and tagging done in 2014 (ruTenTen, n.d.). Sketch Engine gauges keyness by the SimpleMaths score (Kilgarriff, 2009) for comparing the frequency of words in the focus corpus versus the frequency of those words in the reference corpus. It allows several settings in its keyness tool to focus either on higher or lower frequency words. The maximum SimpleMaths score of 1,000,000 focuses on higher-frequency words, while the maximally rare setting, 0.001, focuses on infrequent words. The score that gave the most frequent keywords but excluded function words was 100 (meaning that the keywords in the target corpus are 100 times more frequent than in the reference corpus), and that is the setting that was used in this study.

Sketch Engine also finds key terms, which are multi-word expressions appearing more frequently in the focus corpus than in the reference corpus, and displays them as lemmas. Finding collocation candidates is one of the most important and widely used corpus linguistics tools. The statistical measure used in Sketch Engine at the time of data processing was logDice, which indicates the strength of statistical association between words. It has a reasonable interpretation, scales well on a different corpus size, and is stable on subcorpora (Rychlý, 2008). A special feature of Sketch Engine is its WordSketch tool, which not only finds collocates of the target lemma but also groups them by their grammatical function. This makes it possible, for example, to compare the use of a noun as a subject versus its use as an object, versus its use as a modifier, allowing for a more nuanced analysis. To check collocation patterns, the WordSketch tool was set to use a logDice score of 7 or above and a minimum frequency of 1.

In addition to frequency, keyness, and collocation analysis, this project assessed the semantic prosody of key lexical units. The approach, developed by Sinclair (2003) and Partington (2004), is traditionally understood as ‘typical behaviour of individual lexical items as observed using “key word in context” concordance lines’ (Hunston, 2007, p. 249.) It represents tendencies in collocation, when words from particular semantic fields are more likely than others to collocate with a particular node. Sometimes, but not always, semantic prosody is understood in evaluative terms as positive or (more often) negative.

4. Results and Discussion

The frequency list gives us a rough idea of what aspects are prominently presented in the texts of the articles. Using the Sketch Engine frequency tool and setting the search to lemmas, we see the 40 most frequent lemmas as shown in Table 1 — after excluding function words — with their absolute frequency counts. While Sketch Engine did a good job lemmatizing Russian words, it did not do well with the word ‘Brexit’. Because of that, the word was counted in its various case forms (breksit, breksita, breksitu, etc.), and Table 1 has been adjusted: all counts of ‘Brexit’ are aggregated, making it (unsurprisingly) the most frequent word in the corpus.

1	брексит	brexit*	3,488
2	ес	EU	3,008
3	великобритания	Great Britain	2,724
4	мэй	May	1,827
5	британский	British	1,751
6	год	year	1,749
7	выход	exit (n)	1,749
8	страна	country	1,635
9	соглашение	agreement	1,184
10	европейский	European	1,167
11	заявить	announce	1,140
12	партия	party	1,070
13	парламент	parliament	1,024
14	эксперт	expert	940
15	правительство	government	869
16	вопрос	question	853
17	британия	Britain	827
18	новый	new	816
19	премьер-министр	Prime Minister	782
20	глава	head	759
21	евросоюз	European Union	757
22	делка	deal (n)	731
23	слово	word	730
24	лондон	London	715
25	политический	political	705
26	россия	Russia	698
27	переговоры	negotiations	679
28	референдум	referendum	663
29	отметить	note (v)	646
30	время	time	639
31	джонсон	Johnson	626
32	европа	Europe	619
33	королевство	kingdom	596
34	брюссель	Brussels	569
35	союз	union	565
36	выборы	elections	565
37	министр	Minister	564
38	ситуация	situation	559
39	лидер	leader	557
40	считать	consider	549
41	решение	decision	546
42	отношение	relation	534
43	сторона	side	531
44	мнение	opinion	523
45	позиция	position	516
46	сша	USA	512
47	ирландия	Ireland	511
48	голосование	vote (n)	482
49	сказать	say	465
50	политика	politics	444

Table 1. Most frequent lemmas in the RT Brexit corpus

After checking raw frequencies in the RT Brexit corpus, I identified the keyness of the lexical items using the ruTenTen corpus as a reference corpus. As mentioned in section 3, keyness was identified for words and MWEs if they were 100 times more frequent in the target corpus than in the reference corpus. The comparison of the frequency of words in the two corpora produced the list of keywords in Table 2.

1	ес	EU
2	великобритания	Great Britain
3	мэй	May
4	брексита	Brexit (Gen.)
5	британский	British
6	брекситу	Brexit (Dat.)
7	британия	Britain
8	парламент	parliament
9	РТ	RT
10	Евросоюза	European Union (Gen.)
11	выход	exit
12	соглашение	agreement
13	Джонсон	Johnson
14	референдум	referendum
15	брексит	Brexit
16	лондон	London
17	брюссель	Brussels
18	королевство	kingdom
19	заявить	announce
20	европейский	European
21	ирландия	Ireland
22	эксперт	expert
23	ранее	earlier
24	переговоры	negotiations
25	сделка	deal
26	шотландия	Scotland
27	Джонсона	Johnson
28	партия	party
29	Тереза	Theresa
30	голосование	voting
31	выборы	elections
32	консерватор	conservative (n.)
33	Соединённого	United
34	отсрочка	delay
35	беседа	conversation
36	британец	British (n.)
37	министр	Minister
38	борис	Boris
39	отметить	note (n.)
40	the	the
41	проголосовать	vote (v.)
42	лидер	leader
43	правительство	government
44	отставка	resignation
45	политический	political
46	лейборист	Labourite
47	союз	union
48	парламентарий	MP
49	Трамп	Trump
50	европа	Europe

Table 2. Most frequent keywords in the RT Brexit corpus

Comparing the keywords list (Table 2) and raw frequency list (Table 1) we can see considerable overlap. This indicates that reporting on Brexit differed from more general communication common on the web and utilized vocabulary that was specific to that topic.

It appears that the prominent lemmas in the corpus, whether we look at word frequency or at keyness (compared to a topic-neutral web corpus), can be grouped as:

- Brexit and its technical aspects (Brexit, exit, agreement, question, negotiations, referendum, voting, time, year, situation, decision, relations, politics, elections, position);
- the primary participants: the EU (EU, European, Eurounion, Europe, Brussels, union) and the UK (Great Britain, British, Britain, London, Kingdom, May, Johnson);
- elements of the political process (party, parliament, government, Prime Minister, head, Minister, leader, politically);
- outside observers and observers with special status: USA, Russia, Ireland;
- reporting verbs (declare, say, note, consider) and nouns introducing the experts invited by RT to provide commentary.

Keyness analysis was also applied to identify multi-word expressions, the top 50 of which are shown in Table 3. (As with single words, multi-word expressions were identified as key if they were 100 times more frequent in the target corpus than in the reference corpus.)

1	выход великобритании	UK exit
2	европейский союз	European Union
3	Соединённого королевство	The United Kingdom
4	северная ирландия	Northern Ireland
5	палата общин	House of Commons
6	премьер-министр великобритании	Prime Minister of Great Britain
7	британский парламент	British Parliament
8	Консервативной партия	Conservative party
9	выход страны	country's exit
10	институт европы	Europe Institute
11	институт европы ран	Europe Institute of RAN
12	европа ран	Europe RAN
13	выход британии	Britain exit
14	страна ес	EU country
15	отсрочка брексита	Brexit delay
16	исследование института	Institute's research
17	исследование института европы	Europe Institute's research
18	борисович джонсона	Borisovich Johnson
19	условие брексита	Brexit condition
20	британское правительство	British Government
21	вотум недоверия	vote of no confidence
22	вопрос брексита	the Brexit question
23	проектов соглашения	agreement drafts
24	европейский совет	European Council
25	правительство великобритании	government of Great Britain
26	состав ес	EU composition
27	член ес	EU member
28	руководитель центра	head/director of the center
29	Лейбористской партия	Labour Party
30	Соединённое королевство	United Kingdom
31	таможенный союз	customs union
32	досрочный выборы	snap election
33	кабинет министров	cabinet of Ministers

34	новейший референдум	latest referendum
35	президент США	US president
36	британский парламентарий	British MP
37	парламент Великобритании	parliament of Great Britain
38	национальная партия	national party
39	условие выхода	exit condition
40	повторный референдум	repeat referendum
41	главой Еврокомиссии	head of the European Commission
42	мониторинговой организация	monitoring organization
43	свободная торговля	free trade
44	британский премьер	British Prime Minister
45	точка зрения	Europe Institute
11	институт Европы РАН	Europe Institute of RAN
12	Европа РАН	Europe RAN
46	соединенный штат	United State[s]
47	слово эксперта	expert's word
48	научный сотрудник	researcher
49	состав Евросоюза	composition of the European Union
50	британский министр	British Minister

Table 3. Most frequent multi-word expressions in the RT Brexit corpus

In addition to the phrases referring to Brexit and its aspects and agents, Table 3 contains several key terms used to introduce experts invited by RT to provide commentary, such as Europe Institute, Europe Institute of RAN, point of view, expert's word, and researcher. This observation is in line with previous reports of RT's tactic of distancing itself from the audience's co-produced meanings and over-relying on experts' opinions instead (Hutchings et al., 2015; Miazhevich, 2018).

None of the results so far appear surprising or in any way extraordinary. Mentions of Brexit itself and such aspects as agreement, negotiations, timeframe, and relevant parties are to be expected in a topic-specific corpus. References to Russia in addition to the main actors, such as the UK, the EU, and the USA as a world power, are less likely to appear in other countries' media, but they are logical in RT's discourse. Since RT is reporting for its Russian readers, it draws connections between Brexit and events in Russia or makes predictions about its possible effects on Russian affairs. The overreliance on reporting verbs and such phrases as 'in the expert's words' or 'the expert's point of view' may show that RT did not send their own reporters into the midst of the Brexit events and was content with repeating other media's commentaries. Alternatively, it may be a strategy of appealing to authority, abstaining from expressing its own opinions, and thus projecting objectivity.

To look at the semantic prosody of BREXIT, I checked its collocational patterns. For their identification, Sketch Engine's Word Sketch tool takes into consideration collocates' grammatical relation with the search word, collocation strength, and frequency. It organizes the results according to the typicality score and displays the top 25 items by default. If a particular relation did not have many strong collocates and included less than ten, all are reported here. If the number of collocates was high, they were capped at ten to focus on the ones with the highest collocation strength. The top ten verbs in the sentences with BREXIT as the Subject (ordered by the strength of association) are listed in Table 4.

состояться	happen (Brexit will happen)
произойти	occur/happen (Brexit will occur)
пройти	go (announced that Brexit will go according to the hard scenario)
мочь	be able (that Brexit can)
являться	appear (Brexit is/appears)
отразиться	affect (Brexit will affect)
означать	mean (Brexit means)
быть	be (Brexit was)
привести	lead to (Brexit will not lead to)
обострить	aggravate (how Brexit aggravated the contradictions between Scotland)

Table 4. Verbs in sentences with Brexit as the Subject

The top 10 verbs used with BREXIT as an Object are presented in Table 5.

осуществлять	implement (implement Brexit)
откладывать	delay (delay Brexit till)
переносить	postpone (postpone Brexit until January 31)
проводить	carry out (carry out a Brexit)
обсудить	discuss (leaders briefly discussed Brexit)
останавливать	stop (stop Brexit for the entire UK)
назвать	call (Junker called Brexit the culmination of a continental tragedy)
отсрочивать	defer (with a request to defer Brexit to June 30)
завершать	complete (complete Brexit)
реализовать	realize/implement (realize/implement Brexit)

Table 5. Verbs in sentences with Brexit as an Object

Finally, the modifiers of BREXIT are listed in Table 6.

жесткий	hard (hard Brexit)
неупорядоченный	disordered (disordered Brexit)
мягкий	soft (soft Brexit)
предстоящий	upcoming (upcoming Brexit)

Table 6. Modifiers of Brexit

Reading through the lists of BREXIT collocates, we can see that the evaluation of Brexit seems mostly neutral. The verbs using Brexit as the Subject are neither positive nor negative, with the exception of *обострить* [aggravate] ([how Brexit aggravated tensions between Scotland and England]) and *помешать* [prevent/interfere] (in [emphasizing that Brexit will interfere with the development of both national science and the country]). However, these examples are very few. Most of the verbs using Brexit as an Object are also neutral, with a few positive ones, e.g. *поддерживать* or *поддержать* [support] or *приветствовать* [welcome]. The modifiers are general terms, often mentioned in the discussion of the topic. Since the difference between “hard” and “soft” Brexit was frequently brought up in the negotiations and media reports on the process, it is also present in RT’s discourse. The picture drawn by the RT journalists appears relevant to the events, and it is largely neutral in evaluation.

While it is possible to find expressions of a positive attitude toward Brexit, such as in Example 1 ([long-awaited Brexit will finally happen]), there are just as many negative statements, as in Example 2 ([Brexit will be forgotten as a bad dream]). In fact, negative evaluation seems to prevail:

- (1) *Если план будет утверждён на саммите, а затем одобрен британской палатой общин, то долгожданный **брексит** наконец состоится. Правда, весьма сомнительно, что это событие будет встречено с восторгом активистами.*
 [If the plan is approved at the summit and then approved by the British House of Commons, then the long-awaited **Brexit** will finally happen. Even though it is highly doubtful that this event will be greeted with enthusiasm by activists.]
- (2) *...давайте мы проведём новый референдум, который установит, что с выходом из ЕС мы просто пошутили. **Брексит** забудется, как дурной сон, и всё останется по-прежнему. Желание понятное.*
 [...let us hold a new referendum, which will establish that we were just joking about leaving the EU. **Brexit** will be forgotten like a bad dream, and everything will remain as before. The desire is understandable.]

Mentions of Russia or its officials are not very numerous, but they are still present in the corpus. For instance, Example 3 quotes President Putin replying to a question about Brexit's influence on Russia.

- (3) *Путин оценил возможные последствия брексита для России «Как на нас отразится **брексит**? В минимальном значении. Но он отразится на всей европейской экономике, на мировой экономике, в этом смысле и на нас тоже...»*
 [Putin assessed the possible consequences of Brexit for Russia: “How will **Brexit** affect us? Minimally. But it will affect the entire European economy, the world economy, in this sense, it will affect us too...”]

Besides ‘Brexit’, the most frequent key terms in the corpus were ‘EU’ and ‘Great Britain’. To look at their collostructional patterns, we can examine the collocations identified by the WordSketch tool in Sketch Engine. The five verbs in Table 7 were used in sentences with the EU as the Subject.

требовать	request/demand (EU requests of)
потребовать	demand (that EU will demand conducting a new referendum)
согласиться	agree (EU will agree)
быть	be (EU will be)
мочь	be able (that EU can)

Table 7. Verbs in sentences with the EU as the Subject

The seven verbs that collocate with the EU as an Object are listed in Table 8.

покидать	leave (imperfective)(Great Britain was supposed to leave the EU)
покинуть	leave (perfective) (Great Britain will leave the EU on March 29)
просить	ask (Johnson promised not to ask the EU to move Brexit)
платить	pay (Great Britain will not pay the EU agreed “compensation”)
выплачивать	make payments (Great Britain will have to make payments to the EU for Brexit)
предложить	suggest (Britain will suggest to the EU to keep the free trade)
призвать	call on (called on the EU)

Table 8. Verbs in sentences with the EU as an object

The top 10 collocates that were modifiers of the EU are presented in Table 9.

страна	country (EU countries)
член	member (EU member states)
состав	composition (from the composition of the EU)
саммита	summit (EU summit)
рынок	market (EU market)
союз	union (EU customs union)
гражданин	citizen (EU citizens)
лидер	leader (EU leaders)
государство	state (EU states)
представитель	representative (EU representative)

Table 9. Modifiers of the EU

The European Union does not appear to be a very active participant of the Brexit process: the EU serves as an Object in a sentence more often than as the Subject. Even though the perfective and imperfective forms of the verb ‘demand’ are among the verbs with EU as the Subject, it is often represented as the recipient of an action. The modifiers of the EU are neutral and consist of noun phrases reflecting the union’s structure, rather than describing it as, for example, ‘angry’ or ‘determined’. A typical concordance line with the EU as the node focuses on the UK’s decision to leave it (Example 4).

- (4) *...предстоящие месяцы станут критическими для определения будущего страны. Ранее в Лондоне заявили, что выход Британии из ЕС состоится даже в случае отсутствия договорённостей с Брюсселем.*

[...the coming months will be critical for determining the future of the country. Earlier in London, they said that Britain’s withdrawal from the EU would take place even in the absence of agreements with Brussels.]

Looking at the WordSketch of GREAT BRITAIN, we see a slightly different picture, in that there are more verbs in both the Subject and Object position than for the EU. The 10 top verbs in sentences with GREAT BRITAIN as the Subject are listed in Table 10, and the top 10 verbs with GREAT BRITAIN as an Object are shown in Table 11.

покинуть	leave (that Great Britain will leave the EU)
выйти	exit (Great Britain will exit the EU)
договориться	negotiate/come to agreement (the UK negotiated a flexible extension)
достигнуть	reach (EU and UK reached an agreement on a new)
быть	be (Great Britain was supposed to be)
мочь	be able (what the UK can)
оставаться	stay (UK stays)
выходить	exit/get out (this is the UK getting out)
продолжать	continue (the UK will continue)
отказаться	refuse (UK will refuse)

Table 10. Verbs in sentences with Great Britain/UK as the Subject

выводить	lead out of/take out (lead Great Britain out of the European Union)
успокаивать	reassure (to reassure Great Britain)
удерживать	keep (keeping Great Britain)
ожидать	expect (expect Great Britain)
призывать	call on (call on Great Britain)
покидать	leave (leave Great Britain)
вырвать	snatch/tear out (snatched Great Britain from the tenacious paws)
торопить	hurry (hurried Great Britain)
унижать	humiliate (humiliates Great Britain)
предостерегать	warn (warned Great Britain)

Table 11. Verbs in sentences with Great Britain as an Object

Great Britain appears to be a more dynamic agent than the EU. In sentences where Great Britain is the Subject, it ‘leaves’ or ‘exits’ the EU, and ‘negotiates’ or ‘refuses’ conditions. Where the country is an Object, its leaders ‘take it out’ or ‘hurry’ it out of the organization, and its adversaries try to ‘keep’ it in or to ‘humiliate’ it. In the presented scenarios, the UK’s role seems to be more active, which is logical since it was the United Kingdom that initiated the separation from the joint European body. In addition, descriptions of it contain more details, possibly because the country took the initiative to exit the union and was forced to propose the terms.

- (5) *...период после выхода Великобритании из Евросоюза может быть продлён на несколько лет, а не месяцев. Планируется, что **Великобритания** покинет ЕС 29 марта 2019 года. Пока переходный период определён на 21 месяц — до 2021 года.*
 [...the period after Great Britain’s exit from the European Union can be extended for several years, rather than months. It is planned that **Great Britain** will leave the EU on March 29, 2019. So far, the transition period has been defined for 21 months – until 2021.]

Besides Brexit, the EU, and Great Britain, RT articles often mention the British Prime Minister Theresa May and her successor, Boris Johnson. The WordSketch of MAY showed that her name was mostly used as the Subject of the sentence: 65 out of 67 collocates were verbs in sentences where MAY served as the Subject (as in Example 6), and only two verbs were in sentences where MAY was an Object. Interestingly, her role appears to be largely communicative, as the WordSketch indicates. For example, 26 out of the 65

verbs in sentences where MAY is the Subject are reporting verbs, such as ‘announce’, ‘state’, ‘say’, ‘express’, ‘inform’, etc. If we look at the top 20 collocates, this pattern appears even more prominent: 13 out of 20 are reporting verbs.

- (6) *...что в минувшую пятницу, 6 июля, в Чекерсе был согласован план выхода Великобритании из Евросоюза. Как заявляет **Тереза Мэй**, документ направлен на сохранение торговли с ЕС и отвечает интересам бизнеса. Однако в кабмине её мнение разделили не...*
 [...that last Friday, July 6, in Checkers, a plan for Britain's exit from the European Union was agreed. As **Theresa May** states, the document aims to preserve trade with the EU. and meets the interests of business. However, in the Cabinet of Ministers, her opinion was not shared by...]

The role of Boris Johnson is also largely communicative, as many (32 out of 67) of the verbs in sentences with Johnson as the Subject are reporting verbs, such as ‘state’, ‘promise’, ‘express’, ‘speak’, ‘note’, ‘inform’, etc. (as in Example 7).

- (7) *Премьер-министр Великобритании **Борис Джонсон**, обращаясь к однопартийцам, заявил, что пришло время для объединения страны и успешного завершения брексита.*
 [British Prime Minister **Boris Johnson**, addressing his party members, stated that the time had come for the country's unification and the successful completion of Brexit.]

Going through the list of the collocates for both May and Johnson produces an impression that RT's reporting was largely focused on their speech rather than their actions, although ‘speech acts are both speech and actions’ (Semino & Short, 2004, p. 12), which is especially noticeable in the case of politicians. The most prominent verb collocate of both MAY and JOHNSON by both typicality and frequency is *заявить* [state]. It not only has the highest association score but is also several times more frequent than the next verbal collocate of both MAY and JOHNSON as a Subject. To verify the proportion of speech verbs in the corpus, I set up the SketchEngine concordance tool to calculate all verbs' frequencies. Out of the 50 most frequent verbs in the corpus, 20 are reporting verbs (such as ‘declare’, ‘note’, ‘consider’, ‘say’, ‘remark’, or ‘talk’). In the top 25 verbs list, the proportion of reporting ones is even higher: 12 or nearly half.

A picture seems to emerge that RT's commentary on Brexit heavily relies on quoting politicians or interviewing experts. This is unsurprising considering they are reporting on events unfolding outside of their own country and therefore relying on others' opinions. At the same time, presenting Brexit in this way might be problematic since it might give readers an impression that Brexit is largely a matter of talk rather than economic, social, or political issues. It might reinforce the cliché that politics is nothing but empty words.

The issues highlighted by other researchers (Cap, 2017; Musolff, 2017; Ridge-Newman et al., 2018; Zappettini & Krzyżanowski, 2019) about the discourse on Brexit are present in the RT Brexit corpus as well, even though they do not occupy a very prominent spot. For example, RT articles discussed the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. While the so-called ‘backstop’ itself was remarked on only 56 times (145.62 words per

million), Ireland, Northern Ireland, Irish, etc. were mentioned 637 times (1,656.42 per million), as in (8).

- (8) *...из ЕС без сделки **ирландская** граница будет снова закрыта, что может привести к новому витку борьбы **Северной Ирландии** за независимость. Со своей стороны, Дублин уже пригрозил заблокировать любой вариант сделки по брекситу, который не...*
 [...from the EU without a deal the **Irish** border will get closed again, which may lead to a new round of **Northern Ireland's** fight for independence. For its part, Dublin has already threatened to block any deal version that does not...]

The upswing in Scottish nationalism and the possibility of a new Scottish independence referendum were also pointed out. Scotland, Scottish, and Scots were brought up 666 times (1,731.83 per million).

- (9) *...проведённому в апреле агентством Panelbase для The Sunday Times, в случае «развода» с ЕС без сделки независимость **Шотландии** готовы поддержать 59% её жителей. Напомним, что в 2014 году состоялось знаковое для **шотландцев** событие...*
 [...conducted in April for The Sunday Times by the Panelbase agency, in the event of a "divorce" from the EU without a deal, 59% of its inhabitants are ready to support the independence of **Scotland**. Recall that in 2014, a landmark event for the **Scots** took place...]

RT reports that Brexit may cause problems with nationalist movements within the UK and that both Northern Ireland and Scotland have their own interests in the process, which may not necessarily align with the interests of the United Kingdom as a whole. Their populations voted against Brexit in the referendum, and they are dissatisfied with the conditions they will have to deal with when the decision was mostly pushed for by the population of England. Specifics of the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland are the most problematic, and Brexit is said to have the potential to reignite nationalist movements and possibly derail the peace process.

Finance and economics appear somewhat salient as well: even though the pound was mentioned only 45 times (117.02 per million), ECONOMY/ECONOMIC/ECONOMIST were present 642 times (1,669.42 per million) and FINANCE/FINANCIAL/FINANCED 251 times (653 per million). There were also 28 (72.81 per million) cases of the 'compensation' that the UK would have had to pay the EU to meet its obligation to the EU budget.

- (10) *...Аналитики утверждают, что такой сценарий развития событий может нанести серьёзный удар по **экономике** Великобритании. Для того чтобы этого не допустить, Лондон уже два раза добивался от Брюсселя отсрочки ...*
 [...Analysts affirm that such a scenario of events can cause a serious blow to the UK **economy**. In order to prevent this, London has twice sought a delay from Brussels...]

- (11) *удар Опрошенные RT эксперты ожидают, что сильнее всего в результате выхода Великобритании из ЕС пострадает **финансовый** сектор страны. Роберто д'Амброзио пояснил, что*

*одно из главных преимуществ **финансового** сектора внутри Евросоюза...*

[The experts interviewed by RT expect that the **financial** sector of the country will suffer the most as a result of Britain's exit from the EU. Roberto d'Ambrosio explained that one of the main advantages of the **financial** sector within the European Union is...]

Finally, migrants and migration were referred to 148 times (384.85 times per million). Concordance lines with *мигра*, combining ANTI-IMMIGRANT, IMMIGRANT (n. and adj.), MIGRANT, MIGRATION (n.), MIGRATION (adj.), and EMIGRANT show that migration is an important topic in both Brexit negotiations and in European Union affairs.

(12) *...сохранение с Брюсселем режима единого таможенного пространства на неопределённый срок может вызвать поток нелегальных **мигрантов** в Великобританию и вообще противоречит самой идее брексита.*

[...preserving a unified customs space regime with Brussels for an indefinite period of time may cause a flow of illegal **migrants** to the UK and generally contradicts the very idea of Brexit.]

Overall, neither the backstop, economy, or migration received very detailed discussion or analysis. Despite the prominence of the topic of migration reported by scholars of Brexit discourse (e.g. Cap, 2017; Zappettini, 2019), its presence in RT's narrative is nominal. Even the issues of the UK internal borders and economy, while still not the most conspicuous, were more noticeable in RT's Brexit reporting. A possible explanation is reliance on official statements and Brexit negotiations briefings, which are less likely to reflect the nationalistic rhetoric from less formal sources.

5. Conclusions

This study offers a look into Brexit-related affairs from the point of view of an outsider observing its events from a distance. The discursive image of Brexit, as presented by the RT news agency, appears to revolve around the main participants, such as the UK and the EU. Technical aspects of Brexit, such as agreements, negotiations, and the referendum are also mentioned very frequently in the RT Brexit corpus. Main actors, such as the British Prime Ministers, EU officials, political parties and their representatives are also prominent in RT's writing.

The role of politicians seems largely discursive in the sense that they are mostly reported as talking about Brexit rather than acting. Much of the reporting revolves around the statements made by politicians involved in negotiations, and the whole process is described as having a notable communicative and discursive quality: a large proportion of frequent verbs used to discuss Brexit are speaking/reporting verbs. The important issues related to Brexit, such as the threats to the UK's integrity, potential economic problems, or migration, are present in the corpus, but they are not as prominent as the politicians and their speech activity.

In line with the tendency observed in previous research (e.g., Hutchings et al., 2015; Miazhevich, 2018), RT's commentary relies heavily on quoting

politicians or interviewing experts. This is supported by the fact that reporting verbs (declare, say, note, consider) and nouns introducing the experts invited by RT to provide commentary are some of the most frequent elements of the discourse. It is hard to tell whether this is caused by lack of first-hand experience with the topic, by respect for expert opinion, or by a desire to improve the network's negative reputation through appeals to professionalism.

Overall, there does not appear to be much “clickbait” content. Reporting seems fairly shallow: Brexit technicalities are mentioned very frequently, but they do not receive much discussion or explanation. RT does not sound very interested in Brexit: much of the content consists of short interviews with invited experts and reprints of other media's reports. Such lack of investment in the topic may come from lack of interest on the part of the Russian audience or could be a strategy to imitate reporting while not spending many resources on it.

Notes

1. The agency was launched in 2005 as *Russia Today* but changed its name to *RT* in 2009.

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