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Tomila Lankina\* and Kohei Watanabe\*\*

**‘Russian Spring’ or ‘Spring Betrayal’? The Media as a Mirror of Putin’s Evolving  
Strategy in Ukraine**

**Abstract**

We develop a novel Russian-language electronic content analysis dictionary and method to analyse Russian state media’s framing of the Euromaidan protests. We find that around the time of Crimea’s annexation, the Kremlin-controlled media projected media narratives of protests as chaos and disorder along with legalistic jargon about the status of ethnic Russians and federalisation, only to abandon this strategy by the end of April 2014. The shift in media narratives corresponding to the outbreak of Donbas violence gives credence to arguments about Putin’s tactical and interests-driven foreign policy, while nuancing those that highlight the role of norms and values.

**Keywords:** Russia; Ukraine; Euromaidan; Media manipulation; Electronic content analysis.

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## Introduction

It is well known that Russia deployed modern media technologies as a foreign policy tool in the wake of Ukraine's Euromaidan, annexation of Crimea and war in the Donbas (Cottiero, Kucharski et al. 2015; Darczewska 2014; Dubovyk 2015; Dunn and Bobick 2014; Dyczok 2015; Galeotti 2015, 2015; Gaufman 2015; Hutchings and Szostek 2015; Hutchings and Tolz 2015; Leshchenko 2014; Oates 2013; Pomerantsev 2015; Schimpfoss and Yablokov 2014). Yet, systematic scholarship on Russia's precise media manipulative tactics has remained scarce. A handful of studies have rigorously analysed the narratives deployed in the Kremlin-controlled media in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis (Cottiero, Kucharski et al. 2015; Hutchings and Szostek 2015; Hutchings and Tolz 2015; Nelson, Orttung et al. 2015). Yet, few other observers have gone beyond restating Russia's well-known shock tactics of broadcasting fabricated allegations on state TV like the alleged crucifixion of an ethnically Russian boy; or the image of a heavily pregnant Russian woman, ostensibly murdered by Ukrainian nationalists in the Donbas. Such observations present us with a rather static view of Russia's media tactics, and reveal little about the nuances of shifts in these tactics as the conflict unfolded.

To redress these omissions in scholarship, we develop a novel electronic content analysis method and dictionary for exploring media framing of protests. The content analysis method that we develop in this paper is called Latent Semantic Scaling (LSS) (Author 2015). This technique facilitates the analysis of semantic nuances of how a particular subject—in our case it is protests—is covered in the media. Applying the LSS technique, we constructed a Russian-language dictionary of words frequently appearing in stories about protests. The dictionary construction process involved assigning scores along a *disorder-freedom to protest* scale to lines of text in randomly-selected batches of news stories on protest. This part of the analysis was performed by coders with native Russian language fluency. The computer program that we developed then 'learned' what scores to assign to text on protest based on the human component of coding. Because this process involved both human coding and electronic analysis, it is known as 'supervised machine learning'. The dictionary could be applied to perform electronic content analysis of large volumes of news stories so as to explore over-time shifts in the media framing of protest.

We employ this technique to analyse the framing of Ukraine's protests in Russian state-controlled media. We also perform simple word frequency analysis to explore how the rhetoric about the rights of Russian speakers in Ukraine changed as the conflict unfolded. Nearly 10,000 media stories from both Russia's leading state controlled, and Russian and Ukrainian non-state-controlled, media sources covering the period 1

November 2013 to 31 December 2014, are analysed. We find that around the time of Crimea's annexation, the Kremlin-controlled media projected narratives of protests as chaos and disorder, with legalistic jargon about the status of ethnic Russians and federalisation, only to abandon this tactic by the end of April 2014. This shift in media narratives corresponds to the evolving situation on the ground, notably the outbreak of Donbas violence. As such, it lends credence to arguments about Putin's tactical and pragmatic foreign policy, while nuancing those that highlight the role of norms and values, such as those related to genuine concern about Russian speakers or advancement of Russian nationalist ideology.

Our paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we provide a brief background discussion of the events covered in our study. We then outline our analytical framework. Next, we discuss our methodology and data and present results of electronic content analysis. We then situate our findings in the debates about Russia's foreign policy objectives in Ukraine and highlight how our analysis can contribute to these debates. The final section concludes with a discussion of the scope and limitations of our study, while also highlighting its potential for contributing to wider theorizing into the role of the media in authoritarian regimes' foreign policies.

### **Background and Timeline: The Euromaidan and Russia's Intervention**

Our analytical and methodological strategy consists of exploring the semantic shifts in Russian media's coverage of protest during the first pivotal months of the Ukrainian crisis. We therefore begin by providing a brief outline of these events.

The initial trigger to Russia's involvement in Ukraine had been alleged Western meddling in seeking to keep Ukraine on the Europeanisation track. President Viktor Yanukovich made a last-minute announcement on 21 November 2013 that he would not sign the European Union (EU) Association Agreement at a ceremony in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius on 28-29 November. The Association Agreement was part of the Eastern Partnership (EP) process. It had been conceived by Poland and Sweden and inaugurated officially in 2009 with the aims of intensifying the EU's relationships with Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The Kremlin objected to aspects of the EP process that would arguably prejudice existing trade ties among post-Soviet states and bring Western institutions into what Russia considered to be its area of strategic interest and that it sought to tie into its web of alliances (Wilson 2014).

The Euromaidan started as a peaceful protest on the evening of 21 November 2013 in Kiev and was followed by protests in Ukraine's other major cities.<sup>1</sup> The protests were accompanied by attempts at disruption and violent provocations by the so-called *titushki* (thugs). On November 30, the riot police force units, the *Berkut*, sought to disperse the protests, sparking violence and rioting involving the police and protesters, notably on December 1 when protesters reoccupied the Maidan. On 16 January 2014, the government passed laws restricting freedom of assembly. This sparked further protests and was followed by violence and death of 100 protesters. Both the pro- and anti-Euromaidan forces blamed provocations by the opposite side on the killing of innocent civilians on 18-23 February. On 21 February, EU leaders helped broker a political agreement between the government and the parliamentary opposition forces and activists. The agreement included provisions for return to a presidential-parliamentary government and early presidential elections to be held before the end of the year. On 22 February however Yanukovich fled the country. One week later, on 27 February masked men in unmarked uniforms stormed into the parliament of the Crimean region, taking over strategic buildings and other infrastructure across the Crimean peninsula. On 11 March, the Crimean legislature and city council of the City of Sevastopol declared support for Crimea's independence from Ukraine in the event of a 'yes' vote in a referendum on Crimea's secession. On 16 March, Russia staged a referendum on the incorporation into Russia in Ukraine's Crimea region. On 18 March, the Republic of Crimea, including the City of Sevastopol, signed an accession treaty with Russia, and Crimea and Sevastopol joined Russia as two of its federal subjects. Parallel to these events, beginning in the start of March, pro-Russian and anti-Maidan protests took place in the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts in the southeast of Ukraine, which rapidly escalated into armed military conflict between the rebel groups and Ukrainian military and paramilitary forces. By many accounts, until at least August 2014, when the leadership of the break-away regions changed, Russian armed and security and paramilitary forces had been involved in the conflict (Miller et al. 2015; Minasyan 2015).

On 11 May, a number of towns under the control of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk republics held referenda on their status, but Russia did not officially recognise or sanction the referenda. In fact, on 7 May Russia's President Vladimir Putin publicly urged the rebels to postpone the holding of the referenda. Other evidence also emerged that the Kremlin was losing control of the rebel groups when an agreement between Russia, Ukraine and Western leaders (US and EU) to deescalate the conflict—the Geneva Statement on

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<sup>1</sup> The key dates and events for this timeline are taken from *Wikipedia*. Available at:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donbass\\_status\\_referendums,\\_2014](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donbass_status_referendums,_2014), accessed 6 July 2016.

Ukraine issued on 17 April—prompted a response by the paramilitaries that the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov did not represent them. A widely-cited and publicised poll carried out on 8-16 April in Donetsk by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology revealed that only 27.5% of the population supported seceding from Ukraine and joining Russia; 41.1% supported greater decentralisation and autonomy from Kiev, while supporting the option of Ukraine remaining a unitary state; 38.4% supported turning Ukraine into a federal state; and 10.6% supported the institutional status quo. The referenda in the Crimea and the Donbas cities and towns were widely regarded as illegitimate. The results indicating overwhelming support for secession (96.7% in Crimea) (Wilson 2014) could not be verified by independent observers. Yet, by many accounts, a sizeable share of Crimea's population, perhaps at least 40% (Wilson 2014)—if not in such overwhelming numbers as indicated by the disputed referendum—supported secession, while surveys (such as those cited above) and other expert accounts would not support this assertion for the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (Wilson 2014). The Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 tragedy occurred on 17 July 2014. On that day, the plane going from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur flew over the conflict zone in Eastern Ukraine and was shot down, with all passengers on board killed.

The US announced the first round of sanctions on 6 March 2014. On 17 March, the US, EU and Canada introduced targeted sanctions. On 28 April 2014, a second round of sanctions by the US was imposed, this time directly affecting the business activities in the US of Igor Sechin, Chairman of Russia's state oil company Rosneft, and those of a number of other companies. The EU also imposed further sanctions, specifically imposing travel bans on individuals implicated in support for the annexation of Crimea. In July, August, September, October and December 2014, additional sanctions were imposed by the EU, US and several other states.

In this paper, we consider Russia's reaction to the Euromaidan in the context of the earlier Colour Revolutions that have challenged unpopular leaders. This happened in Ukraine in 2004, but also in Georgia, Serbia and Kyrgyzstan. In fact, as Andrew Wilson (2014, p. 66) reminds us, even before Yanukovich's 'volte face' on Vilnius, Ukrainian activists had been planning to stage demonstrations on November 22 to mark the ninth anniversary of the original 2004 Maidan and to register their frustration with Yanukovich. Two years before the Euromaidan, in the Winter months of 2011-2012, Russia also witnessed a mass uprising when thousands of protesters brandishing white ribbons—the symbol of the protest movement—took to the streets of Moscow, St. Petersburg and other cities across Russia (Skovoroda and Lankina 2016). The protesters challenged electoral misconduct perpetrated in the December State Duma (Parliamentary) elections and registered their

anger at the prospect of Vladimir Putin being re-elected as President for a third time in the March 2012 Presidential elections. Not only did the Kremlin resort to repression to prevent future protests, but it also deployed the state-controlled media to stigmatize anti-regime rallies (Authors 2016).

President Yanukovich's flight from Kiev in February 2014 and much-publicized abandonment of his lavish residence would have further underscored for the Kremlin the power of mass street protests to topple unpopular rulers, and those who could be perceived as Russia's regional allies, from power. Throughout the summer months, Euromaidan remained a constant backdrop to the conflict, with thousands of protesters demanding a voice in reforming Ukraine and in the country's governance.

### **Analytical framework**

Our concern in this paper is to explore how Russia's state-controlled media covered the Euromaidan. We use the term 'state-controlled' to refer to TV and print sources and the online versions of these sources that are partially or fully owned by the state. We also explore coverage by sources that are not state-owned. Considering that editorial policy is likely to be influenced by the specific owners of media outlets, even if the media proprietor is not the state, we hesitate to use the term 'independent' with reference to such sources. We therefore describe them as 'non-state-controlled' or 'not controlled by the state'. The empirical analysis section of the paper provides further detail on the ownership structure of the various sources.

To begin to make sense of how Russia's state-controlled media covered the Euromaidan, and how media coverage shifted as the events unfolded, we deploy the concepts of *agenda-setting* and *framing*. These are established lenses for analysing media coverage of public issues. According to media scholarship, mass communications often perform an important agenda-setting function. In their widely-cited book, Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder highlight how viewers are often unaware of particular topics, or have not formed opinions on them, until these topics repeatedly appear in the narratives of TV presenters. 'Those problems that receive prominent attention on the national news become the problems the viewing public regards as the nation's most important', they hypothesize (1987, p. 16). In what Iyengar and Kinder (1987, p. 33) refer to as an 'agenda-setting effect', they find that television in particular can powerfully alter the public's priorities by virtue of disproportionate coverage of a particular issue. As the media shift to focusing on another topic, so too is the perception of which public issues the audience ought to focus on and perceive as significant. In another classic body of work, Maxwell McCombs suggests that how both television and print media sources select particular

news to focus on, the volume of coverage, and where the news sources place specific stories in terms of sequence or location, can likewise powerfully affect what the public perceive to be ‘important topics of the day’. ‘While the press may not tell us what to think, it is stunningly successful in telling us what to think *about*’, he writes (1977, p. 90) (emphasis original).

The other concept of *framing* that we deploy in our analysis had been popularized by the sociologist Erving Goffman several decades ago and has been widely used since in social movement scholarship in particular (Goffman 1975). We here employ the definition of framing by Thomas Nelson et al. (1997, p. 567) as a ‘process by which a communication source such as a news organization, defines and constructs a political issue or public controversy’. ‘Frames serve as bridges between elite discourse about a problem or issue and popular comprehension of that issue’, write Nelson et al. in another article (1997b, p. 224). Frames can be thus regarded as cues for interpreting matters of public significance and for making judgements about appropriate remedies for particular problems. Frames can go beyond simply reinforcing existing opinions: they can in fact help alter public attitudes and preferences (Cottle 2008; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Gamson and Meyer 1996; Lindekilde 2014; McAdam, McCarthy et al. 1996; Peng 2008; Snow and Benford 1992; Snow, E. Burke Rochford et al. 1986; Snow, Louis A. Zurcher et al. 1980; Zald 1992).

When it comes to the nuances of framing specifically related to protest, following Nelson et al. (1997), and building upon our earlier frame analysis (Authors 2016) we distinguish between two broad shades of media framing of protest: protest as public disorder (the *disorder* frame); and, alternatively, protest as representing the right of citizens to public assembly (the *freedom to protest* frame). Of course, these contrasting frames could be regarded as extremes on a semantic scale whereby frames on one end stigmatize street protest, and, on the other end, portray it as legitimate or desirable in a democratic state. For example, in a story framed as *freedom to protest*, we might find positive references to protests as respectable and legitimate expressions of mass concern about important political issues. In a *disorder* story, we might see protesters as marginal figures, or we might be shown pictures of armed police in riot gear (Nelson, Clawson et al. 1997). In democracies too, the media often tend to default to a ‘status quo’ perspective (McLeod and Detenber 1999), subtly delegitimising street rallies (Deluca, Lawson et al. 2012; Smith, McCarthy et al. 2001). We would expect the media in authoritarian states to be especially prone to resorting to a disorder narrative of protests that challenge the domestic regime or its allies abroad.



In analysing the media's role in the Euromaidan and the domestic and inter-state crisis that followed, much of the analytical inquiry has focused on the role of online social media use by citizens (Bohdanova 2014; Dickinson 2014; Goban-Klas 2014; Leshchenko 2014; Onuch 2015; Zaliznyak 2014). Some studies have touched upon both the *agenda-setting* and *framing* aspects of Russian media (Goble 2014; Hutchings and Szostek 2015; Potyatynyk and Potyatynyk 2014). Thus, Potyatynyk and Potyatynyk (2014) have shown how Russian media narratives drew on the Second World War symbolism and vocabulary to foment ethnically-based hostility towards Ukrainian-speakers and thereby justify Russia's irredentism in Ukraine (see also Kuzio 2015; Suslov 2014; Teper 2015). Cottiero et al. (2015) also highlight how the narratives of 'fascism' and 'Nazism' were arguably effective in tapping into the repository of shared wartime national memories.

Our focus and methodological strategy are different here. Essentially, we explore the extent to which Russia replicated the semantic toolkit that the Kremlin used against its own protesters at home to stigmatize street action as inherently dangerous and destabilizing at various stages of the crisis. We also analyse the proposed remedies that featured in the media against the backdrop of rhetoric on violence and disorder. The changes in the nuances of protest framing and in the likelihood of particular agenda featuring in the media as the events unfolded are also explored. We know from a number of qualitative studies that following Crimea's annexation, the Russian regime changed its tactics in Ukraine in response to intra-elite disagreements and loss of control over the Donbas rebels. For example, scholars have pointed to Russia's dis-engagement from the agenda of 'federalisation' or Crimea-style separation of Ukraine's South-eastern regions when Russia's President Vladimir Putin realised that a relatively peaceful scenario was not to be repeated in the Donbas. This scenario was even less likely in the cities of Kharkiv and Odessa and the four areas that Russia began to refer to as 'New Russia', namely Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhya, Kherson and Mykolayiv (Kuzio 2015; Wilson 2014). Russia also allegedly changed track when it became evident that only a minority of Russian-speakers supported Ukraine's 'federalisation', or backed the separation of regions with significant Russian-speaking populations (Alexseev 2015; Dubovyk 2015; Giuliano 2015; Hale, Kravets et al. 2015; Haran 2015; Kuzio 2015). Yet, few scholars have heeded the call by Stephen Hutchings and Joanna Szostek to regard Russia's media narratives in particular as an analytical mirror of the goals, the shifting ideas and fears driving foreign policy in the Ukrainian crisis (2015, p. 184). Rigorously analysing the shifts in the media's *agenda-setting* and *framing* would enable us to nuance our understanding of how the Russian regime's tactics evolved and changed over time as it reacted to the rapidly escalating conflict. Based on the above discussion, we articulate our hypotheses as follows:

### *Framing*

H1: Russian state-controlled media's framing of protest throughout the duration of the Euromaidan will be significantly more likely to trend in the direction of the *disorder* framing as compared to coverage by non-state-controlled news sources.

H2: Russian state-controlled media will be significantly more likely to employ the *disorder* framing of protest in the wake of the annexation of Crimea as compared to earlier coverage of the Euromaidan protests.

H3: Russian state-controlled media will be significantly less likely to employ the *disorder* framing of protest after the eruption of hostilities in the Donbas as compared to coverage of protests in the wake of the annexation of Crimea.

### *Agenda setting*

H4: Russian state-controlled media will be significantly more likely to frame protest as *disorder* when advancing the agenda of Ukraine's 'federalisation', 'referenda' on the status of regions with significant Russian-speaking populations, 'reform' and 'constitutional' status of ethnically 'Russian' or 'Russian-speaking' populations.

H5: Russian state-controlled media will be significantly more likely than non-state-controlled media sources to advance the agenda of Ukraine's 'federalisation', 'referenda' on the status of regions with significant Russian-speaking populations, 'reform' and 'constitutional status' of ethnically 'Russian' or 'Russian-speaking' populations.

In the following section, we outline the methodology that we have developed to study Russian state-controlled media's protest framing and agenda setting, and apply it to analyse media coverage of the Euromaidan protests.

## Data, Method and Analysis

### *Methodological strategy*

For our analysis, we harvested stories on the Ukrainian crisis from the Integrum media database for the period 1 November 2013 to 31 December 2014. This period corresponds to the weeks just before the start of Euromaidan, and the end of the calendar year in which Russia annexed Crimea, the war in the Donbas erupted, Western sanctions on Russia were imposed, the MH17 flight tragedy occurred and the Minsk process to resolve the crisis commenced. Our analysis proceeds as follows. We begin by applying the framework developed by (Authors 2015) to analyse whether Russian state-controlled media tend to resort to protest *framing* whereby street protests are portrayed in terms of violence, chaos and disorder (the *disorder* frame); or, alternatively, in more positive terms, as a citizen right (the *freedom to protest* frame). Because the Euromaidan rallies in Kiev provided a backdrop for Russia's intervention in Ukraine, we seek to capture the nuances of evolving coverage of street protest in Russian state-controlled media. We are seeking in particular to identify significant or anomalous shifts towards the *disorder* narrative. Next, we compare coverage by Russia's state-controlled media with coverage by Russia's non-state-controlled news sources, as well as by *Zerkalo nedeli* (Mirror Weekly), Ukraine's leading news source that is not controlled by the Ukrainian state or the Kremlin. The logic behind this strategy is straightforward. We aim to ensure that media coverage does not simply capture the violence that indeed accompanied the pro- and anti-Europeanisation and pro- and anti-regime protests in Kiev and other parts of Ukraine, but rather, represents attempts to dramatise the disturbances and breakdown of social order accompanying street rallies. Next, we proceed to analyse the *agenda-setting* aspects of media framing. Specifically, having identified anomalous swings in Russian state-controlled media's coverage of protest in Ukraine, we generate a random sample of stories for qualitative analysis by the authors. In our reading of the news stories, we aim to ascertain what they tell us about proposed ways of resolving the crisis. We then seek to infer Russia's foreign policy intent from over-time shifts in the media coverage of Ukrainian protests.

### *Media sources*

For our analysis, we have selected both the Russian federal (national) newspapers and federal TV channels, which are all to a greater or lesser extent state-controlled, even though they might have different ownership and management structures (Akhterov 2011; Dobek-Ostrowska and Smaele 2010; McNair 2000). The newspapers included in our analysis are *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, *Izvestiya* and *Komsomolskaya pravda*. The newspaper

*Rossiyskaya gazeta* is a daily fully owned by the Russian government.<sup>2</sup> It adheres to formal writing style, and features state laws, directives and official announcements, in addition to political commentary and news. Russia's state agencies tend to have a subscription for daily issues of *Rossiyskaya gazeta*. Our second newspaper, *Izvestiya* is also a daily newspaper, with a large readership pool. First printed in 1917 as one of the main official Soviet newspapers, it had been privatised in the early 1990s (Jones 2002). It is now owned by the National Media Group Company,<sup>3</sup> which also has a 25 percent stake in Channel 1.<sup>4</sup> *Izvestiya* became known for aggressive pro-Kremlin news coverage in particular after the December 2011 anti-government street protests in Russia. Our third newspaper is the daily *Komsomolskaya pravda*, a tabloid-style source. It is owned by the ESN Groups that belong to Grigory Berezkin who made his money in oil business and currently sits on boards of a number of state corporations, such as the Russian Railroads.<sup>5</sup> The newspaper in recent years has become associated with aggressively pro-Kremlin news coverage. When reporting on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, it has featured strong nationalist and populist language.

By many accounts, television has been a key source of information for many Russians, particularly as print newspaper circulation dwindled in the 1990s (Akhterov 2011; Cottiero, Kucharski et al. 2015; Enikolopov, Petrova et al. 2011; McNair 2000; Mickiewicz 2008; Nelson, Orttung et al. 2015; Oates 2006; Smaele 2010; Smyth and Oates 2015). For our analysis, we have selected three leading state TV channels: Russia 1, Channel 1 and NTV. The state channel Russia 1 is fully government owned and forms part of the All-Russian State Television and Broadcasting Company (VGTRK) group.<sup>6</sup> Channel 1 is regarded as Russia's leading TV channel. The Russian state owns a majority 51 percent stake in the company, while the closed joint stock company National Media Group owns 25 percent,<sup>7</sup> and the Kremlin-friendly oligarch Roman Abramovich owns

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<sup>2</sup> 'O gazete', *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, available at: <https://rg.ru/about/>, accessed 8 July 2016.

<sup>3</sup> 'Sostav holding', *NMG*, available at: <http://nm-g.ru/#sostav-holdinga>, accessed 8 July 2016.

<sup>4</sup> 'Osnovnye etapy razvitiya gazety Izvestiya', *RIA Novosti*, 13 February 2012, available at: <http://ria.ru/spravka/20120313/592628788.html>, accessed 8 July 2016.

<sup>5</sup> 'Grigory Berezkin', *Forbes*, 21 March 2013, available at: <http://www.forbes.ru/profile/grigorii-berezkin>, accessed 8 July 2016; 'Sovet direktorov', *Rossiiskie Zheleznye Dorogi*, available at: [http://rzd.ru/ent/public/ru?STRUCTURE\\_ID=5185&layer\\_id=5554&id=1209](http://rzd.ru/ent/public/ru?STRUCTURE_ID=5185&layer_id=5554&id=1209), accessed 8 July 2016.

<sup>6</sup> 'O kompanii', *VGTRK*, available at: <http://vgtrk.com/#page/221>, accessed 8 July, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> 'Sostav holding', *NMG* available at: <http://nm-g.ru/#sostav-holdinga>, accessed 8 July 2016.

a 24 percent stake.<sup>8</sup> The channel NTV is owned by Gazprom Media and is widely regarded as a Kremlin-controlled outlet.<sup>9</sup>

To ascertain whether there are differences in the editorial line between print and online versions of the sources analysed, we consulted the editorial staff of *Izvestiya* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*.<sup>10</sup> We were told that online news articles are produced by the same teams of journalists working on print issues. Content featuring in the print editions represents a subset of the online editions. Journalists from the Russia channel's news programme *Vesti* whom we contacted indicated that online news include posts harvested from external sources.<sup>11</sup> We expect that the editorial policy of these sources is to selectively exclude stories on sensitive topics. We were not able to contact the editorial staff of the TV channels, but we assume that the above policy also holds true for those outlets.

Despite the existence of a diverse and complex media market in Ukraine, leading Russian news sources have enjoyed wide readership and viewership, particularly among Ukraine's Russian-speaking populations. Serhiy Leshchenko (2014) writes:

Media outlets based inside Russia continue to wield significant influence within Ukraine. The lack of a robust Ukrainian print-media tradition and the weak advertising market have left a gap that Russian newspapers have filled by churning out their own Ukrainian editions. These publications typically reprint articles directly from their Russian counterparts including *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Izvestia*, *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, *Trud*, and other outlets with origins in the Soviet era.

Furthermore, he writes,

equally if not more influential—especially in eastern and southern Ukraine—is Russian television. In the south, 47 percent of residents report watching Russian news programs. In the east, the figure is 44 percent. Such levels of exposure to Russian propaganda help to explain the public mood and the

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<sup>8</sup> 'Kto vladeet SMI v Rossii: vedushchie holdingi', *BBC Russian Service*, 11 July 2014, available at: [http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2014/07/140711\\_russia\\_media\\_holdings](http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2014/07/140711_russia_media_holdings), accessed 8 July 2016.

<sup>9</sup> 'O kompanii', *Gazprom Media*, available at: <http://www.gpm.ru/ru/about/index>, accessed 8 July 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with deputy editor of *Izvestia* and observer at *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, October 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with *Vesti* journalist, October 2015.

outbursts of separatism that have accompanied (and served as a pretext for) Russia's recent military intervention (Leshchenko 2014).

Echoing Leshchenko, Potyatynyk and Potyatynyk have highlighted that some 60% of print newspapers in Ukraine is in the Russian language; the figure is as high as 80% for magazines. 'A cursory look at newsstands—even in Lviv, the epicenter of the pro-Ukrainian and pro-European Sentiment—will confirm this figure', they write (2014). Russian-language prime-time television had been likewise dominant in Ukraine's media landscape. A survey conducted in October 2012 revealed that 44% of Ukraine's TV broadcasting was in Russian language (Potyatynyk and Potyatynyk 2014).

To analyse how Russian state-controlled media's coverage of the crisis differed from coverage by sources outside of Kremlin control, we generated stories on protest from three additional Russian and Ukrainian online sources: *Rosbalt*, *Interfax* and *Zerkalo nedeli*. *Rosbalt*, with headquarters in Moscow and St. Petersburg, is one of the most widely-cited and read online source of news and analysis in Russia. The editor of *Rosbalt*, Natalya Cherkasova, is married to Viktor Cherkasov, who occupied senior positions in the Government and Security services agencies under Putin. This however, has been regarded as providing the outlet with a certain degree of protection from harassment suffered by other media sources.<sup>12</sup> In October 2013, *Rosbalt* was subject to legal action in the Moscow City Court, which ruled that the agency's registration is to be made invalid based on allegations of ostensible use of 'inappropriate language'.<sup>13</sup> The decision to suspend the operations of *Rosbalt* was overturned by the Supreme Court on 19 March 2014 however and the Court decided in favour of reinstating the registration of *Rosbalt*.<sup>14</sup> *Interfax* is a non-governmental media agency. It employs several hundred journalists and has a number of federal, regional and national branch agencies, including in Kiev. *Zerkalo nedeli* is widely respected among Ukrainian experts as Ukraine's leading Russian-language media source. The

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with *Rosbalt* journalist, December 2015.

<sup>13</sup> A Pussy Riot video featuring swearing featured on the website. Tat'yana Vol'tskaya, "'Rosbalt" pochti zakryt', *Radio Svoboda*, 31 October 2013. <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/25153954.html>, accessed 6 July 2016.

<sup>14</sup> <https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%B1%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%82>, accessed 6 July 2016.

newspaper also has Ukrainian- and English-language editions.<sup>15</sup> It is generally considered to be a non-partisan source, albeit of a liberal-leaning orientation.<sup>16</sup>

For those sources, we downloaded TV transcripts, newspaper articles and newswire reports from the Integrum Russian news database. We searched for stories on protest by employing the search term ‘protest\*’ (‘протест\*’). If online editions of news sources were available from the database, they were also downloaded, but stored separately from the print or broadcast editions. The total number of news stories harvested for the period 1 November 2013 to 31 December 2014 is 22,568. We present a breakdown of the figure in Table 1. Unfortunately, TV transcripts were not available for Channel 1 and for NTV during this period. We therefore used online editions of these news channels as the best available sources approximating the content featuring in the broadcast versions. News stories on the websites of these state-controlled channels are produced by the same staff, so we do not expect the tone of coverage to vary significantly between the online and broadcast sources.

[Table 1 about here]

### *Content analysis*

Considering the very large number of news stories on protest in the period of investigation, we rely on electronic content analysis.

### **News filtering**

The stories downloaded from the database using a single search keyword are likely to include articles not related to street protests in Ukraine. We therefore introduced a geographical classifier developed by (Author 2015), which can accurately rank countries most strongly associated with particular news stories by automatically constructing a large dictionary of proper names associated with specific countries. The importance of geographical classification in news analysis of a large volume of stories is often overlooked. We consider this process important however because simple keyword matching tends to result in the retrieval of a large number of stories from contexts outside of the geographic area of investigation. For the purpose of dictionary construction, we also downloaded foreign news produced by the Russian news agency ITAR-TASS during the

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<sup>15</sup> E-mail communications with Russian and Ukrainian journalists, February 2016.

<sup>16</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zerkalo\\_Nedeli](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zerkalo_Nedeli), accessed 6 July 2016.

same period, and updated the dictionary each day using the stories for the best classification accuracy. Based on the results of geographical classification, we selected for our analysis stories ranked as having the first or second strongest order of association with Ukraine.

The geographical classifier effectively removes news stories about protests other than those occurring in Ukraine, but we found another source of noise in the data. The keyword ‘protest\*’ employed in the database search may appear in different semantic contexts. For instance, our data contained stories about legislative or judicial battles. These stories are not related to street protest because ‘protest’ may refer to legal cases. An example would be when the prosecutor’s office lodges a ‘protest’ or when opposition deputies in a regional assembly lodge a formal ‘protest’ against particular laws or policies. One straightforward and commonly-used approach to eliminating irrelevant stories is to exclude those in which the keyword occurs only once. This procedure is highly selective however and risks eliminating short stories even if they may be about street protests. To capture the relevance of news stories that vary in length, we first measured the normalised frequency of approximately 1,000 protest-related words in each of the news stories. We also made sure that we selected stories with frequency greater than a certain threshold.<sup>17</sup> As a result of the geographical classification and this filtering procedure, the number of news stories decreased to between 10% and 80% of the downloaded material (Table 2).

[Table 2 about here]

### **Computer-aided dictionary making**

Our corpus of several thousand full-text news items is of course too voluminous for in-depth qualitative analysis of each news story. Furthermore, it would be challenging for researchers to code documents spanning many months highly consistently. We therefore performed dictionary-based content analysis by employing a *disorder-freedom to protest* dictionary and scale. In extracting the relevant words from news stories and in developing criteria for attaching scores to those words in our dictionary along the *disorder-freedom to protest* scale we relied on the Latent Semantic Scaling (LSS) dictionary construction technique and semantic analysis method developed by one of the authors of this paper (2015).

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<sup>17</sup> These words were selected based on frequencies of co-occurrences (‘collocation’) with the word ‘protest’.

The threshold of 0.046 is the first quantile (25%) of frequencies of the words in a subset of news stories selected employing the conventional keyword matching approach (‘protest’ occurs more than once).



LSS is essentially a new computer program that helps identify words frequently occurring in stories on a particular topic and to assign scores to those words. The word frequency search part of the technique aids in the dictionary construction process. The process of attaching scores to words in the dictionary is meant to capture the semantic nuances of the usage of words related to the particular topic—in the case of our analysis it is protest. In the existing Latent Semantic Analysis (LSA) approaches developed by other scholars, scores are estimated either by statistically analysing word co-occurrence (collocation), or by estimating spatial proximities of words (Landauer and Dutnais 1997; Turney and Littman 2003). Our technique differs from the above two approaches in that it includes both collocation analysis and spatial analysis. The combination of the two different analytical techniques ensures that LSS dictionaries are robust against the inclusion of irrelevant words in news stories. It is also highly sensitive to subtle differences in news content. We also obtain higher reliability of parameters estimated by exploiting rich information in a large corpus of news stories.

For the present analysis, we adopted the protest framing dictionary from our previous research project on street protest in Russia. For that project, we downloaded a large corpus of Russian-language news stories on protest from the Integrum database of Russian news (containing 27 million words). Two native Russian speakers then content-analysed a sample of thirty news stories sentence by sentence and assigned scores to each sentence on a five-point *disorder-freedom to protest* scale. The first fifteen news stories were employed to aid the electronic dictionary construction (training set), and the remaining fifteen news stories were then used to validate the result of electronic content analysis employing the dictionary (test set). Figure 1 shows the scores assigned by the human coders and the computer in the training set (black) and test set (red). The framing scores on the *disorder-freedom to protest* scale using the dictionary range between -20 and +20. The level of agreement between human coding and machine coding in the test set, measured by Pearson's correlation coefficient, was  $r=0.75$ . This result demonstrates the validity of dictionary coding of our large text data on protests.

[Figure 1 about here]

### **Framing analysis**

In order to identify news bursts of coverage of protests in Ukraine, we calculated average volumes of news stories on protest that appeared in Russia's state-controlled media within seven-day periods. As illustrated in Figure 2, we observe spikes in the volume of news stories on 8 December 2013, on 23 January 2013, on 21

February 2014 and on 12 April 2014. We then treated the stories that appeared within twenty-eight-day windows of the spikes in protest news coverage ( $\pm$ fourteen days of the key dates) as belonging to the respective K1-K4 clusters. Applying the same procedure to non-state-controlled media, we checked if there is any surge in protests that had not been reported in Russia's state-controlled media. We found broadly similar patterns in volumes of news reporting on protests.

[Figure 2 about here]

In Figure 3, red circles show framing scores of individual news articles published by state-controlled media on the *disorder-freedom to protest* scale, and the red curve represents smoothed values of the framing scores over the same time period. Framing of protests by non-state-controlled media is represented by a black line. Note that individual articles are not shown because that would make the graph over-crowded. In the graph, we observe that the framing of protest by state-controlled sources and non-state-controlled media tended to go parallel until mid-February 2014. After that, the framing of protest in Russia's state-controlled media becomes more negative and remains significantly different from that of non-state-controlled media until August 2014.

[Figure 3 about here]

Figure 4 directly compares the means of framing scores of the four clusters with 95 percent confidence intervals. Note that lower values on the framing scores represent a tendency to portray protests as *disorder*, while higher values indicate a *freedom to protest* trend in framing. We observe that the framing of protest in Kremlin-controlled media had been relatively positive in K1 (5.31), but then the framing scores dropped by 2.35 points in K2, then by a further 1.50 points in K3. After K3, the scores plunged further, by 5.63 points, reaching the lowest point in K4 (-4.18). By contrast, non-state-controlled media's framing had not been as positive as that of the Kremlin-controlled media in K1 (2.97), but it showed a decrease in K2 by only 1.41 points. Furthermore, we even observe a slight increase in the protest framing scores in K2 and K3 (0.58 points). Non-state-controlled media's framing also becomes more negative in K4, but only at the level of 3.06 points. These results partially confirm H1, which states that *Russian state-controlled media's framing of protest throughout the duration of the Euromadan will be significantly more likely to trend in the direction of the disorder framing as compared to coverage by non-state-controlled news sources.*

[Figure 4 about here]

Next, we estimated differences in framing between sources using regression analysis.<sup>18</sup> Although K4 had been the most negative cluster in Figure 5, the result of the regression analysis suggests that the Kremlin-controlled media's framing had been actually most negative in K3, as compared to the other time periods. Specifically, Russia 1 (-5.42,  $p < 0.016$ ), Channel 1's online edition (-4.72,  $p = 0.041$ ) and *Komsomolskaya pravda* (-12.0,  $p = 0.055$ ) became significantly more negative in their coverage of protests than in K1. K4 does not feature the strongest *disorder* framing of protest by Russia's state-controlled media because framing by *Interfax* also becomes negative in K4, reflecting the nature of the events on the ground. In K4, relative to *Interfax*, only *Komsomolskaya pravda*'s online edition becomes slightly more negative (-2.5,  $p = 0.057$ ) than the paper's framing of protest in K1. These results corroborate H2, namely that *Russian state-controlled media will be significantly more likely to employ the disorder framing of protest in the wake of the annexation of Crimea as compared to earlier coverage of the Euromaidan protests*. The results also support H3, which states that *Russian state-controlled media will be significantly less likely to employ the disorder framing of protest after the eruption of hostilities in the Donbas as compared to coverage of protests in the wake of the annexation of Crimea*.

[Figure 5 about here]

Having presented the variations in protest framing for the different time periods and news sources, we now turn to exploring the *agenda-setting* dimension of Russian state media's coverage of popular discontent in Ukraine. In our analysis of protest *framing*, we employed the LSS technique. To analyse the *agenda-setting* aspect of Russia's media strategy in Ukraine we now rely on a more straightforward content analysis technique of searching key words in news corpora and analyzing variations in frequency of use in different time periods. Considering that we observe an anomalous dip in the state-controlled media's protest framing scores in K3 in particular, we generate a random selection of stories that appeared in that time period. This is meant to help us identify themes that featured most prominently just when the Russian media resorted to especially negative coverage of discontent in Ukraine.

We find that many stories in the sample featured references to Ukraine's federalization, to the constitutional status of disputed territories and to the status of ethnic Russians and Russian language speakers. The stories also contained references to violent disruption of pro-Russian protests or to violence on the Maidan

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<sup>18</sup> We employed a multi-level regression model, whereby news articles are grouped by day in order to control for daily variations in framing.

(captured by the *framing* dimension of our analysis).<sup>19</sup> We therefore estimated how protests were framed in association with the use of keywords ‘federation’ (Федера\*), ‘constitution’ (конституц\*), ‘Russian’ (русск\*)—the stem of the word that conveys the ethnic, rather than nation-state meaning of Russian—, ‘reform’ (реформ\*) and ‘referendum’ (референдум\*). We created dummy variables for occurrences of those keywords in news articles by simple pattern matching. We then explored the nature of protest framing associated with those words using multivariate regression analysis. As shown in Table 3, all but one of those keywords are found to be strongly and significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ) associated with negative framing of protest in Russia’s state-controlled media. Although ‘referendum’ is associated with more positive protest framing, we find that in stories featuring ‘federation’ or ‘Russian’ along with ‘referendum’, protest coverage likewise trends towards the *disorder* rhetoric.

[Table 3 about here]

These results largely corroborate H4, which states that *Russian state-controlled media will be significantly more likely to frame protest as disorder when advancing the agenda of Ukraine’s ‘federalisation’, ‘referenda’ on the status of regions with significant Russian-speaking populations, ‘reform’ and ‘constitutional’ status of ethnically ‘Russian’ or ‘Russian-speaking’ populations.*

From our sample of news items, we also obtained frequencies of news stories containing each of the keywords in clusters. In so doing, we sought to ascertain whether Russia’s state-controlled media used specific words more frequently than did the non-state-controlled media. The results presented in Figure 6 show that

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<sup>19</sup> See for instance <http://www.ntv.ru/novosti/889136/>, *NTV*, 6 April 2014, accessed 6 July 2016;

<http://www.ntv.ru/novosti/891356/>, *NTV*, 7 April 2014, accessed 6 July 2016;

<http://www.1tv.ru/news/world/256225>, *TVI*, 11 April 2014, accessed 6 July 2016;

<http://www.ntv.ru/novosti/903696/>, *NTV*, 12 April 2014, accessed 6 July 2016;

<http://www.1tv.ru/news/world/256438>, *TVI*, 15 April 2014, accessed 6 July 2016. An illustrative story contains a reference to ‘benderovite fascist junta’ in Kiev and potential for ‘Slavic and other peoples chocking on blood’, alongside demands for federalisation, *Komsomol’skaya pravda*, 16 April 2014, available at:

<http://www.kp.ru/online/news/1712717/>, accessed 6 July 2016. Another story mentions ‘Holocaust’ against the people, alongside a reference to demands for federalisation, *NTV*, 14 April 2014, available at:

<http://www.ntv.ru/novosti/906256/>, accessed 6 July 2016.

'reform' featured 1.59 times more frequently in stories published in Russia's state-controlled media as compared to those in the non-state-controlled sources in K2. The words 'Russian', 'referendum' and 'federation', respectively, featured 7.25, 6.54 and 1.53 times more frequently in state-controlled media in K3. In K4, the words 'federation' (1.64 times), 'Russian' (2.02 times) and 'referendum' (2.11 times) appeared more frequently in state-controlled media than in the non-state-controlled sources. All of those differences were found to be statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) in Chi-square tests.

[Figure 6 about here]

We also investigated keyword use until the end of 2014 and compared it with keyword occurrences in non-state-controlled sources. We found that the Kremlin-controlled media frequently used the above-listed keywords only between February and June 2014 (Figure 7). After this period, the differences in frequency of usage between the state-controlled and non-state-controlled sources are not very pronounced.

[Figure 7 about here]

These results corroborate H5 for the period February-June 2014, namely that *Russian state-controlled media will be significantly more likely than non-state-controlled media sources to advance the agenda of Ukraine's 'federalisation', 'referenda' on the status of regions with significant Russian-speaking populations, 'reform' and 'constitutional status' of ethnically 'Russian' or 'Russian-speaking' populations.*

For ease of interpretation of how key developments surrounding the crisis might have influenced Russia's media coverage, we created a timeline of key events between November 2013, when the Euromaidan protests erupted, and August 2014, by which time Russia annexed Crimea and had been involved in supporting the Donbas rebels (Figure 8). From the timeline, it is evident that Russia intensified its negative coverage of the Euromaidan significantly after the Russia-supported government fell and Yanukovich fled the country. Prior to that, Russian media's framing of protests is not markedly different from that of non-state-controlled sources. Furthermore, there does not appear to be obvious correspondence between the numbers of casualties among Russian speakers as violence erupted, and negative coverage of the Euromaidan. In Odessa, on 2 May 2014, forty-eight protesters were killed. Hundreds of civilians, both Russian- and Ukrainian-speakers, died in the Donbas between April 2014 and the end of our observation period, December 2014. In fact, the military

hostilities involving the rebels and armed forces loyal to the new government in Kiev in the summer months resulted in significantly more casualties among Russian-speakers in the Donbas than in April, when we observe the most pronounced trend in the negative framing of protest combined with media narratives about federalisation and the status of Russian speakers.

Additional author-gathered data on protests occurring throughout Ukraine between February and September 2014 and featuring slogans that either challenged or, alternatively, supported Russia's involvement in the crisis, indicate that protests in the latter category peaked around February-March, only to subside by May. The protests data indicate that protests broadly supportive of the Euromaidan and challenging Russia's intervention in Ukraine generally featured larger numbers of participants; many occurred in the south-eastern regions (Figures 9-11). These data indicate that sustained protest activism by Russian speakers in favour of separatism was not widespread in territories outside of the Crimea. To further make sense of Russia's media coverage of protests, we now turn to discussing the debates on Russian foreign policy objectives in Ukraine.

[Figure 8 about here]

[Figure 9 about here]

[Figure 10 about here]

[Figure 11 about here]

### **Russia's Objectives in Ukraine**

To what extent does our analysis help adjudicate between key strands of the wider debates on the drivers of Russia's foreign policy in Ukraine, going beyond the more specific issue of media manipulation? One area of debate concerns the extent to which Russia's policy has been driven by a normative impulse to protect Russian-speakers (Tsygankov 2015). A related set of questions is whether the separatist impulse in the Crimea and Donbas has been largely home-grown (Giuliano 2015; Kudelia 2014), with Russia reacting to the grassroots appeals of Russian-speakers as part of its normative, value-driven, agenda (Tsygankov 2015), or, alternatively, whether these appeals had been part of an externally- (Russia-) driven strategic calculations that in fact involved engineering these sentiments and demands in the first place. Finally, scholars have highlighted that

disagreement among Russia's leaders (Bacon 2015; Dugin 2014; Horvath 2015)<sup>20</sup> and failure to reign in the motley factions of pro-separatism fighters in the Donbas (Shevel 2014) have arguably also shaped Russia's tactics in the course of the early, pivotal months of the conflict in Ukraine.

Andrei Tsygankov's (2014) concept of 'honour' in international relations provides an apt characterisation of his argument about Russia's imperative to come to the aid of Ukraine's Russian-speakers. It is important to note that Tsygankov accepts that a combination of factors motivated Russia's policy in Ukraine in the wake of the Euromaidan. These factors include security concerns about EU's and NATO's eastward expansion and concerns about protecting the benefits of economic interdependence among post-Soviet states (see also Sakwa 2015). But, he also highlights the ideological, moral and nationalism imperatives like shared 'Slavic culture' and 'protecting Russia's old historical and cultural ties with its neighbour' as significant—and genuine—drivers of these policies, alongside material and security interests (Tsygankov 2015). Thus, Tsygankov (2015, pp. 287, 288) writes:

Russian values include an authentic concept of spiritual freedom inspired by Eastern Christianity and the idea of a strong, socially protective state capable of defending its own subjects from abuses at home and threats from abroad. . . . Russians consider Ukrainian people to be 'brotherly' and are resentful of what they view as the Western nations' attempts to challenge the established cultural bond or to convert Ukraine into their own system of values.

Relatedly, in what would support the conjecture that Russia had been reacting to the pleas of Ukraine's Russian-speaking populations, a number of scholars, whether they share the argument about the nationalist and normative concerns driving Russian policy in Ukraine or not, have emphasized genuine popular support for federalisation or outright separatism, and for calls for the protection of the rights of Russian speakers. Some scholars have for instance argued that Russian-speaking populations felt betrayed by the corrupt national elite and its cronies in the disintegrating political structures in Ukraine's regions (Sakwa 2015). Elise Giuliano (2015)

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<sup>20</sup> For a flavour of the sentiment among Russian far-right nationalist groups about the regime's ambivalence and intra-regime divisions with regard to the annexation of Donbas, see 'Aleksandr Dugin: Putin, ochnis'!' *Biznes Onlain: Delovaya elektronnyaya gazeta Tatarstana*, 23 August 2014, available at <http://123ru.net/moscow/6165909/>, accessed 6 July 2016..

reminds us that an emphasis on Russia's role in the crisis tends to obscure the fact that a significant minority of populations in the Donbas shared the demands of the separatists. Serhiy Kudelia (2014) views the Donbas insurrection as 'primarily a home-grown phenomenon'. He writes: 'political factors—*state fragmentation, violent regime change, and the government's low coercive capacity*—combined with popular emotions specific to the region—*resentment and fear*—played a crucial role in launching the armed secessionist movement there' (emphasis original).

Others however have begged to disagree with the notions that 'honour', nationalism or normative imperatives drove Russian foreign policy following Ukraine's Euromaidan protests and the resignation of Yanukovich, or that popular sentiments of Russian-speakers somehow made separatist sentiment imminent (Laruelle 2015b; Teper 2015). As Paul Chaisty and Stephen Whitefield (2015) note, political calculations, not 'principled ideological nationalism' was the key imperative behind Putin's tactics in the Crimea and Donbas. As other scholars have also argued, Putin has always been a reluctant nationalist, keeping the ultra-conservative and radical national 'neo-slavophile' and 'neo-Eurasianist' (Teper 2015) ideologues like Alexander Dugin—who popularized the term Russian Spring<sup>21</sup> to refer to pro-Russian nationalist mobilization in Ukraine—and Aleksandr Prokhanov, at bay. The latter-day acceptance of these controversial thinkers into the political mainstream arguably followed the regime's realization of the unlikely alliance between nationalists and political liberals during the 2011-2012 mass electoral protests against the Putin regime (Laruelle 2015b; Makarychev and Yatsyk 2014; Popescu 2012).

Accordingly, those who have highlighted the value imperatives of Russia's foreign policy as a primary motivating factor have been leaning more towards interpreting Russia's intervention in Ukraine as a response to sentiments and demands of Russian speakers. By contrast, proponents of the strategic interests argument have underlined how Russia initiated the secessionist impulse in Ukraine in the first place. They have also argued that the Putin regime manipulated nationalist sentiment and used the 'thinkers' associated with its radical expression to garner support for irredentism in Ukraine. It then proceeded to distance himself from radical nationalist agenda when it became evident that adhering to this agenda would involve substantial economic and military costs (Laruelle 2015a,b). Staying put with an irredentist agenda in the face of evidence that Putin's meddling was unwelcome would of course present significant public relations—and military and other collateral—costs to

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<sup>21</sup> Aleksandr Dugin, 'Russkaya vesna i ee prodolzhenie', *Izborskii klub*, 4 March 2014, available at:

<http://www.izborsk-club.ru/content/articles/2912/>, accessed 15 March 2016.



a regime seeking to portray itself as the protector of the rights of Russia's brethren in the wider *Russkiy mir* (Russian World).<sup>22</sup>

The argument that Putin's actions in Ukraine largely reflected his geopolitical tactical and strategic calculations is also supported from the quarters of the ultra-nationalist ideologues themselves. Some of these individuals in the wake of Crimea's annexation rallied around Putin only to feel betrayed as the events on the ground unfolded.<sup>23</sup> Alexander Dugin highlighted the deep divisions within the Russian policy establishment that emerged after it became evident that a Crimea-style, 'peaceful' scenario was not to materialize elsewhere in Ukraine. Indeed, by late April 2014 Putin arguably favoured at least partial disengagement from Donetsk and Luhansk. 'Disengagement' would be a misrepresentation of the depth of Russia's involvement in Donetsk and Luhansk after Crimea's annexation considering evidence of Russian manpower and military hardware deployed in the conflict (Miller, Vaux et al. 2015; see also Minasyan 2015). Yet, as Yuri Teper (2015) wrote—and in what would support Dugin's assertion of an 'April shift' in Putin's strategy—, it was precisely in late April-May 2014 that Putin began to backtrack on specific demands advanced by the Russian government after Crimea's annexation. These earlier demands had been suggestive of an intention to replicate the Crimea scenario in Ukraine's other predominantly Russian-speaking eastern and south-eastern regions.

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<sup>22</sup> A concept popularised by nationalist publicists like Alexandr Dugin to refer to territories in the former USSR with large Russian speaking populations notably Belarus, Eastern Ukraine, Crimea and Northern Kazakhstan. It also appeared in the rhetoric of various politicians including Putin himself referring to a fluid and nebulous entity of those united by love of Russian language and culture. For a discussion, see Vladimir Abarinov and Galina Sidorova, 'Russkii mir, bessmyslennyi i besposhchadnyi', *Radio Svoboda*, 18 February 2015, available at: <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/26855650.html#page=1>, accessed 2 July 2016.

<sup>23</sup> In his 18 March 2014 address after Crimea's annexation, Putin repeatedly referred to the rights of ethnic Russians (*russkie*). Available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>, accessed 6 July 2016. On April 17, during another televised press-conference, Putin admitted to providing military backing for Crimea's native 'self-defense forces' (*sily samooborony Kryma*) in the form of the mysterious 'green men' (*zelenye chelovechki*). Putin also warned against 'euphoria' associated with Crimea and cautioned against expecting a similar scenario elsewhere in Ukraine. Available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796>, accessed 4 March 2016.

Our media analysis lends further credence to arguments that highlight how tactical considerations, and less so, the ‘honourable’ impulse to protect Russian-speakers abroad in the name of an overarching national idea, drove Putin’s policy during the pivotal months following the eruption of the Euromaidan protests. The Russian media amplified the rhetoric of chaos, violence and disorder threatening fellow Russian-speakers and projected legalistic jargon about federalisation, constitutional change and the rights of Russian speakers. It then toned down this rhetoric at the point when violence erupted in the Donbas. The fact that the Kremlin-guided press did not engage much in such rhetoric after April suggests that either Putin failed to concern himself with the pleas of Russian speakers about federalisation, constitutional change or human rights on the ground, or that he and his entourage engineered or grossly amplified these concerns in the first place. The latter interpretation is more plausible in light of both our media analysis and the discussion of the qualitative literature on the subject.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper, we performed content analysis of Russian state-controlled media’s coverage of the Euromaidan protests. Specifically, we analysed how Russian media framed protests and how framing changed over time as the political events unfolded and as Russia annexed Crimea and engaged in a proxy war in the Donbas. We also explored the agenda-setting dimension of media coverage to ascertain how the media’s rhetoric on the status of ethnic Russians and on constitutional reform changed over time. Our framing analysis is based on the Latent Semantic Scaling (LSS) technique developed by one of the authors of the paper. The technique enabled us to construct a Russian-language dictionary that could be used to perform electronic content analysis of media coverage of protest along a *disorder-freedom to protest* scale. The framing and agenda-setting aspects of Russian state-controlled media’s coverage of the events in Ukraine were contrasted with those of Ukrainian and Russian media sources that are not controlled by the state. We find that Russian state-controlled media became significantly more likely than did the non-state controlled sources to adopt a *disorder* frame in coverage of protests after Yanukovich fled the country and in the wake of Russia’s annexation of Crimea. The media also intensified rhetoric on the status of ethnic Russians and federalization. Both the framing and agenda-setting aspects of the coverage of protests by Russian state-controlled media however roughly fell in line with coverage by sources outside of the Kremlin control following the eruption of violence in the Donbas.

We are fully aware that our analysis of shifts in media framing of protest and in the usage of specific terms related to the status of ethnic Russians and territorial reform has its limitations when it comes to

uncovering the motivations behind the shifts in framing. Systematically analysing what led to the observed shifts in media coverage of protest would require an in-depth exploration of the 'black box' of the Kremlin's decision making, which falls outside the scope of our paper. For instance, our analysis stops short of ascertaining the extent to which factional struggles among the Kremlin elites affected the observed shifts in policy. Nevertheless, our findings correspond to other studies cited in the paper, which, while not specifically analysing the media, have found similar tactical shifts in Russia's foreign policy in Ukraine as the conflict unfolded. This in turn provides some confidence in the validity of our media analysis method.

Our paper helps nuance other systematic research specifically concerned with the role of Russia's media in the furtherance of domestic and foreign policy. Thus, Stephen Hutchings and Vera Tolz (2015) have rightly cautioned against regarding the leading pro-Kremlin media personalities as mere puppets of the Kremlin. Puppets they may not be, but when it comes to policies of immense national significance, the narratives of media producers suspiciously follow the ebbs and flows of the Kremlin's shifting tactics in Ukraine.

Our analysis also contributes to the wider comparative theorizing into the media as a tool in the domestic and foreign policies of authoritarian states (Gehlbach and Sonin 2014; Jones-Rooy 2012; King, Pan et al. 2013; Morozov 2012; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011; Treisman and Guriev 2015). In the emerging literature on the use of the media to manipulate information on protest in autocracies, there is disagreement as to how rulers will exploit nationalist sentiment in particular to advance their domestic political and foreign policy objectives. Some scholars have suggested that authoritarian regimes may want to limit information that would fuel nationalist sentiment at home considering the potential implications for political instability (King, Pan et al. 2013). Others have argued that authoritarian rulers may find some utility in fuelling nationalism at home if it helps them to rally citizens behind the regime (Dimitrov 2008; Hutchings and Tolz 2015; King, Pan et al. 2013; Morozov 2012; Weiss 2013). The specific techniques of manipulation of public opinion will of course vary depending on the peculiarities of national politics. In the Russian case, a number of scholars have noted that the state-controlled media began to systematically exploit Russian nationalist sentiment in the wake of the December 2011 protests (Chaisty and Whitefield 2015; Hutchings and Tolz 2015; Tolz and Harding 2015). These protests featured an unlikely alliance between liberal and nationalist forces in opposition to the Putin regime (Laruelle 2014; Popescu 2012; Umland 2011). That Russia resorted to nationalist rhetoric in its media coverage of the Euromaidan thus to a certain extent may represent an extension of the policy of rallying citizens around the regime under the Russian nationalist banner. What we find however is that the state-controlled media

quickly changed tactics as the events in Ukraine unfolded. As noted in the paper, these tactical shifts may have come in response to the collapse of the Yanukovich government, and then shifted again in response to western sanctions. They may have also changed when Russia realised that domestic appetite for the annexation of the Donbas territories in Ukraine is weak. The flow of refugees into Russia from the conflict zone may have also tempered domestic support for Russia's irredentism in Ukraine. The shifts in media framing and nationalist rhetoric that we observe reflect the regime's adaptability to rapidly changing political circumstances at home and abroad.

Our Russian media analysis thus provides an additional building block in the generation of empirical knowledge about the sources of both authoritarian resilience (Nathan 2003) and authoritarian vulnerabilities (Pei 2012), much of which is derived from studies of China. Similar to China, the capacity of Russia's regime to effect tactical policy shifts given the information about past, ongoing and new popular challenges may well foster authoritarian resilience. Alternatively, we also show how the peculiarities of protest framing and of the media's agenda setting could provide clues as to regime vulnerabilities otherwise obscured behind the mask of apparent invincibility to domestic and external public opinion.

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## Tables and Figures

**Table 1: Number of news stories downloaded**

	<b>Sources</b>	<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>TV</b>	<b>Online</b>	<b>Newswire</b>
State-controlled	<i>Izvestiya</i>	366	-	813	-
	<i>Komsomolskaya Pravda</i>	455	-	2,864	-
	<i>Rossiyskaya gazeta</i>	559	-	0	-
	<i>Channel 1</i>	-	0	1,549	-
	<i>NTV</i>	-	0	2,557	-
	<i>Russia 1</i>	-	2,557	-	-
Non-state-controlled	<i>Zerkalo nedeli</i>	322	-	2,265	-
	<i>Interfax</i>	-	-	-	5,586
	<i>Rosbalt</i>	-	-	-	2,675
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1,702</b>	<b>2,557</b>	<b>10,048</b>	<b>8,261</b>

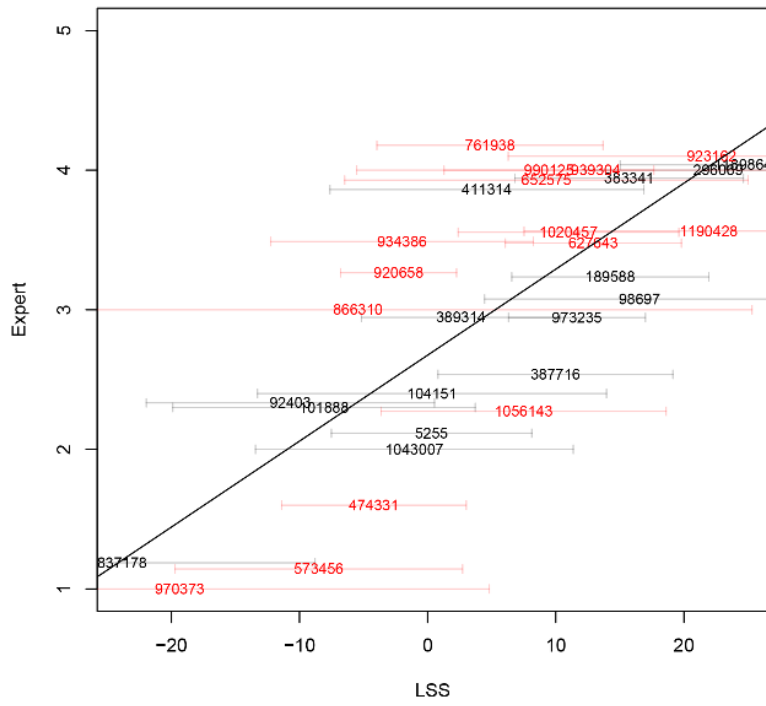
**Table 2: Number of stories on protest in Ukraine**

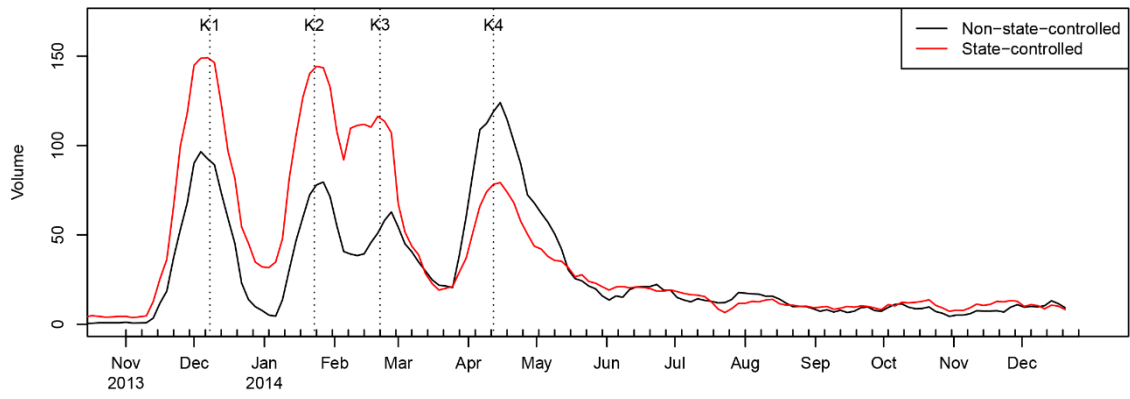
	<b>Sources</b>	<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>TV</b>	<b>Online</b>	<b>News wire</b>
State-controlled	<i>Izvestiya</i>	64 (17.5%)	-	198 (24.4%)	-
	<i>Komsomolskaya pravda</i>	60 (13.2%)	-	1,183 (41.3%)	-
	<i>Rossiyskaya gazeta</i>	98 (17.5%)	-	-	-
	<i>Channel 1</i>	-	-	641 (41.4%)	-
	<i>NTV</i>	-	-	1,322 (51.7%)	-
	<i>Russia 1</i>	-	671 (26.2%)	-	-
Non-state-controlled	<i>Zerkalo nedeli</i>	43 (13.4%)	-	1,301 (57.4%)	-
	<i>Interfax</i>	-	-	-	2,162 (38.7%)
	<i>Rosbalt</i>	-	-	-	2,089 (78.1%)
	<b>Total</b>	<b>265 (15.6%)</b>	<b>671 (26.2%)</b>	<b>4,645 (46.2%)</b>	<b>4,251 (51.5%)</b>

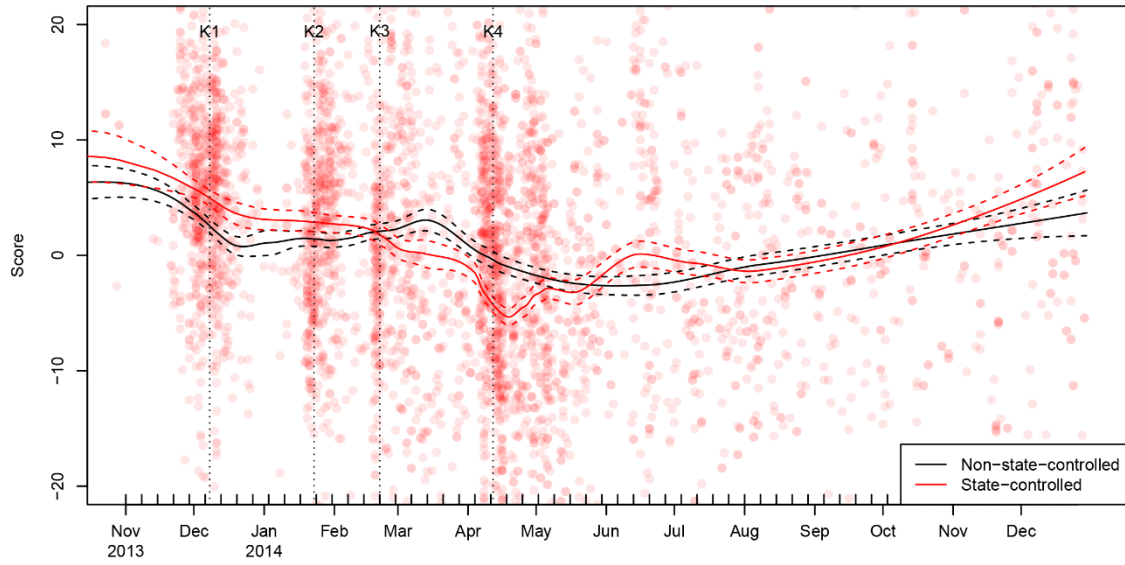
**Table 3: Framing of protest associated with keywords**

<i>Keyword</i>	<i>Score</i>
Federation	-6.41
Constitution	-2.61
Russian	-7.05
Reform	-2.34
Referendum	3.05

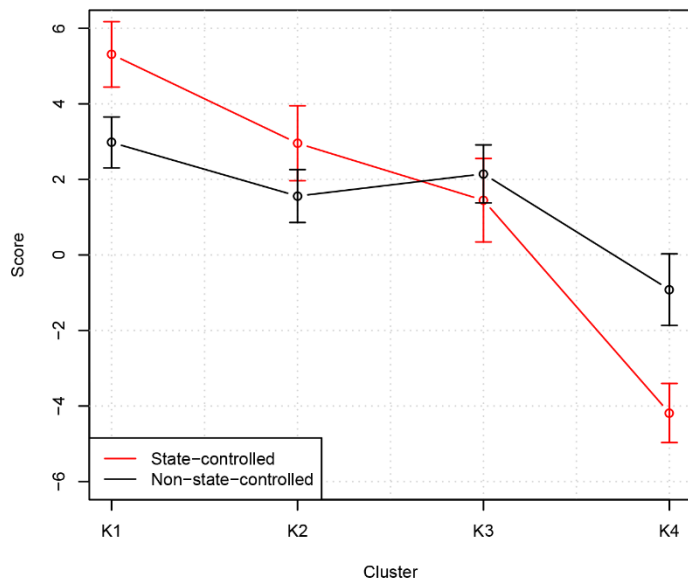
**Figure 1: Agreement between human and machine coding**



**Figure 2: Seven-day average volume of news stories on protest**

**Figure 3: Framing of protest by Russia's state-controlled media**



**Figure 4: Framing of protest in clusters K1-4**

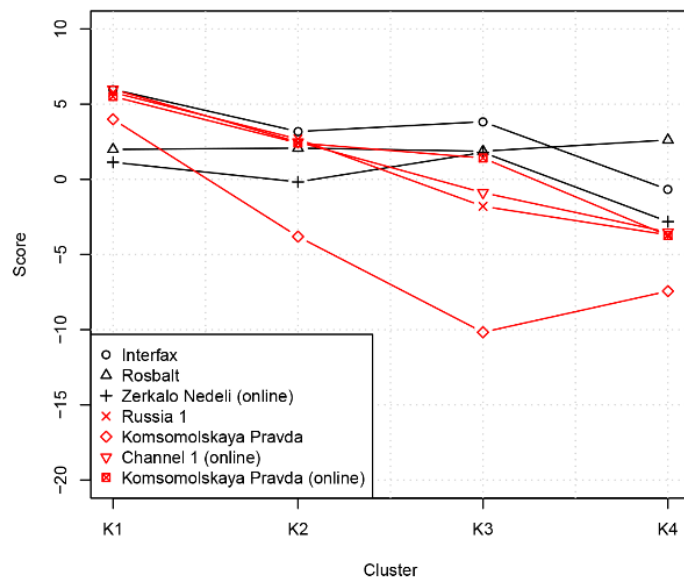
**Figure 5: Differences in protest framing between sources in clusters K1-K4**

Figure 6: Frequency of keyword use

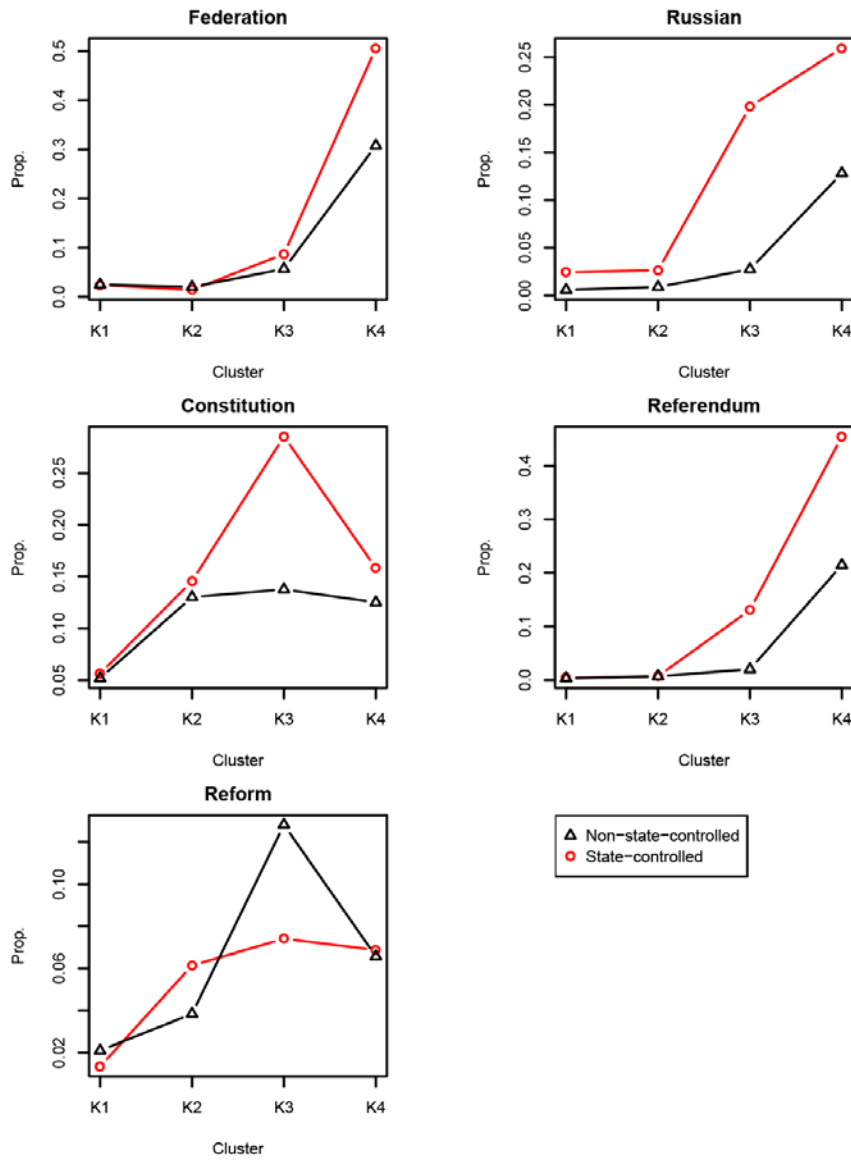
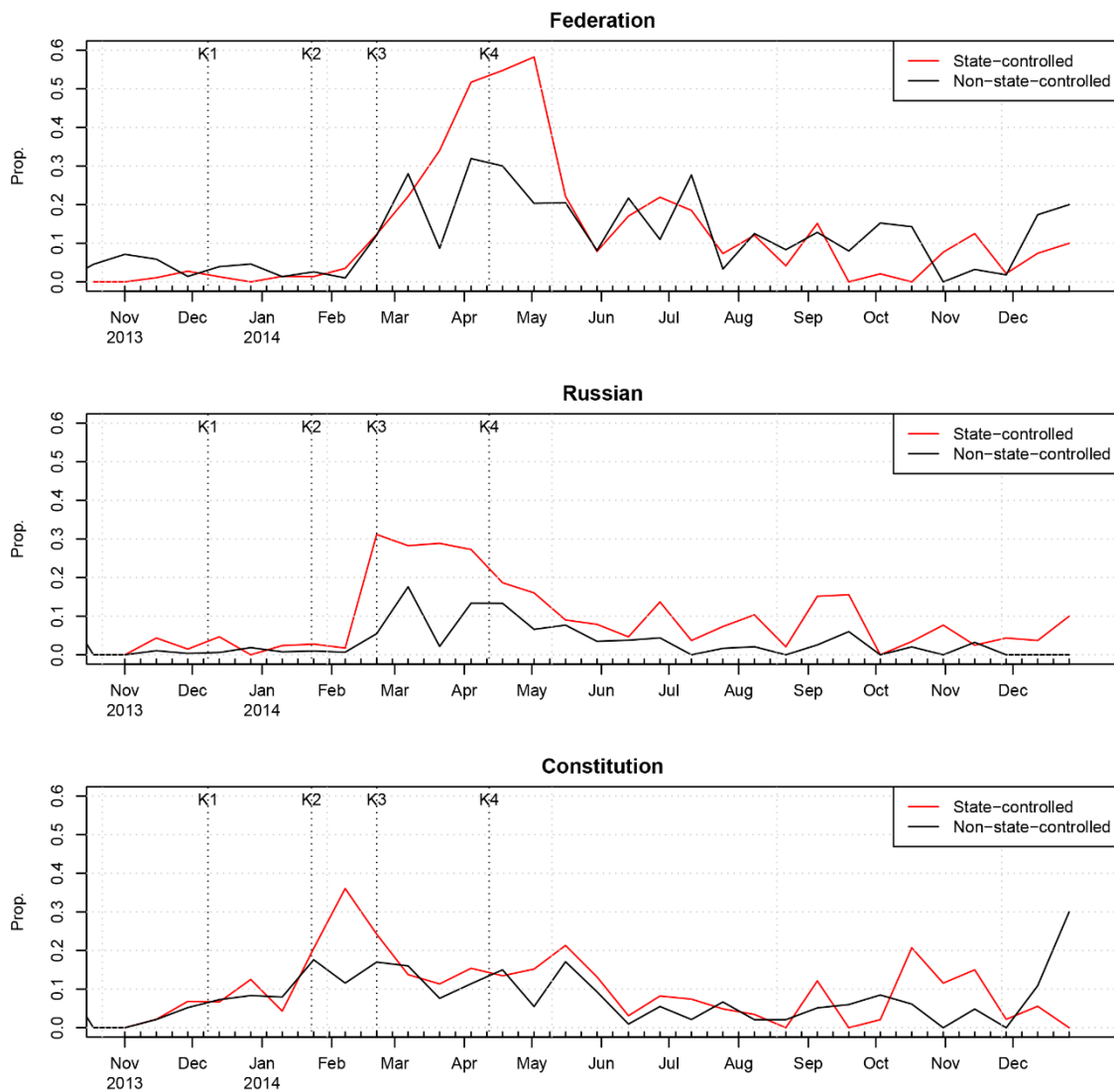


Figure 7: Frequency of use of keywords until the end of 2014



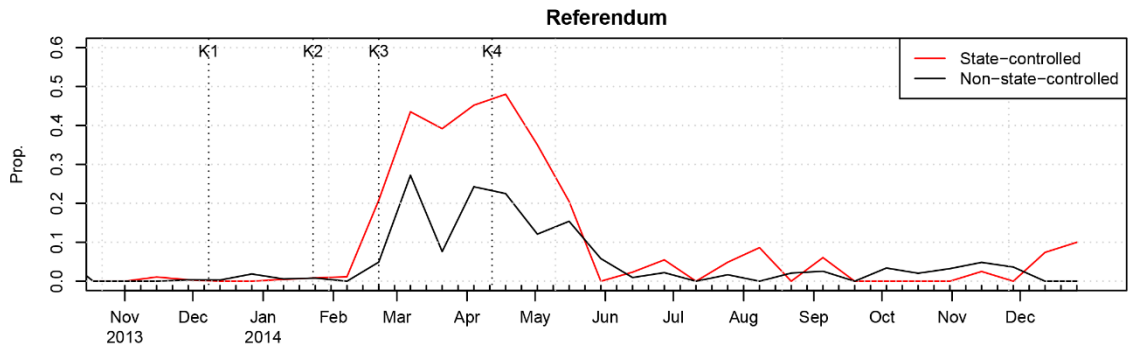
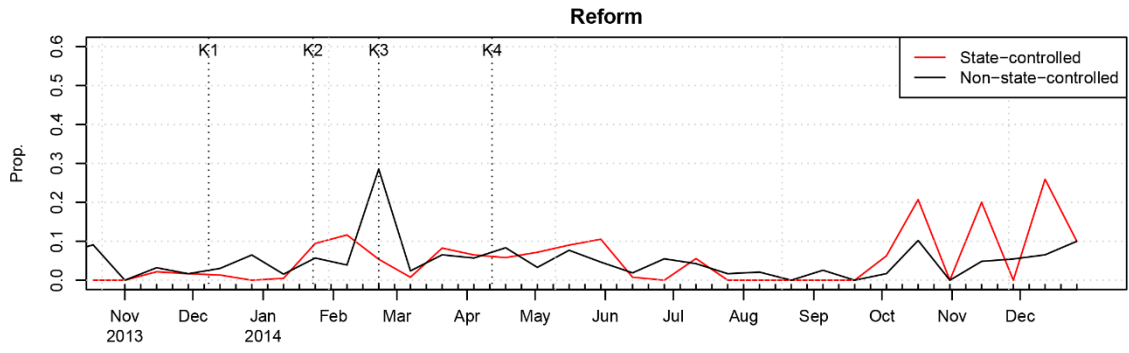
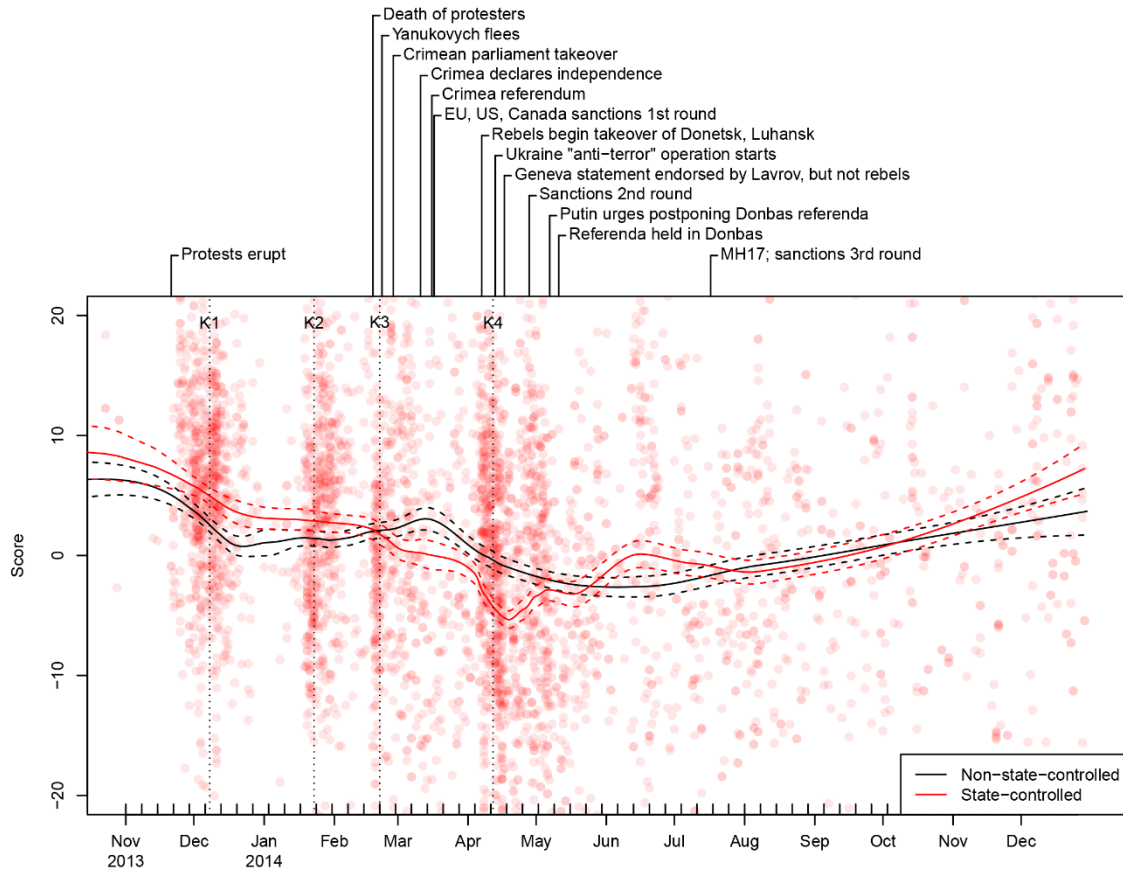
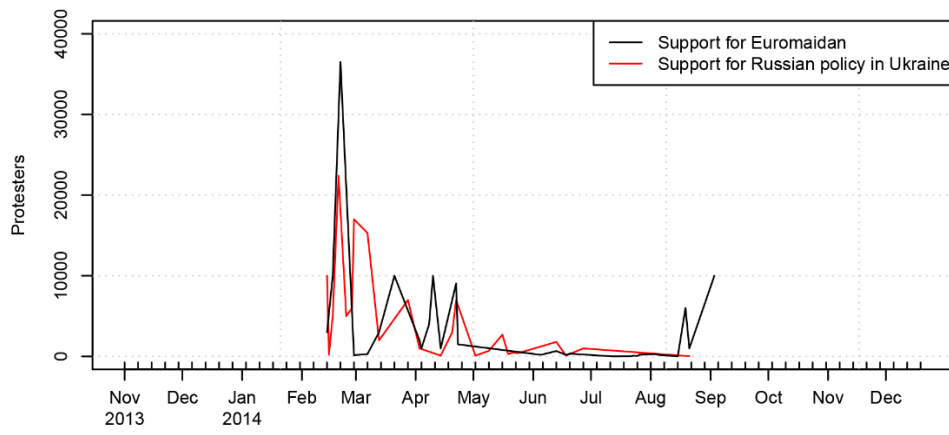
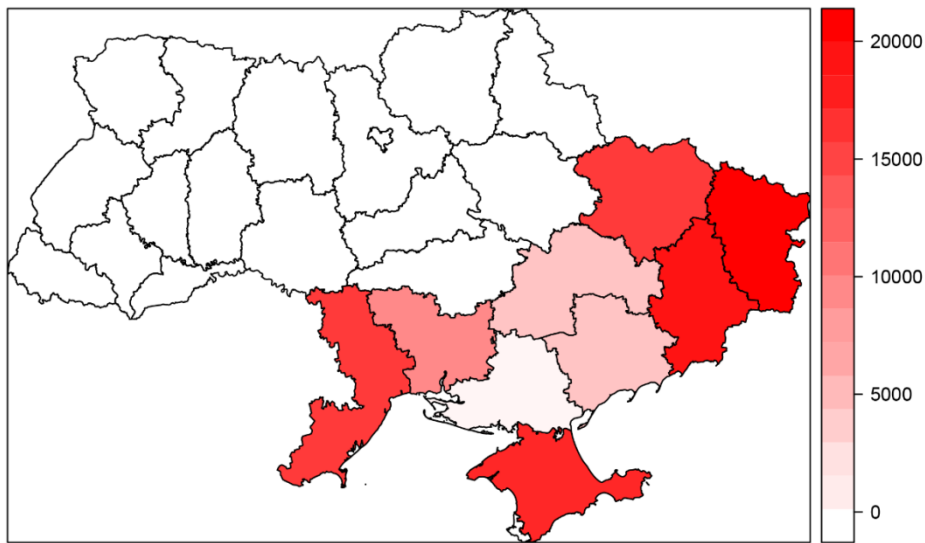


Figure 8: Timeline

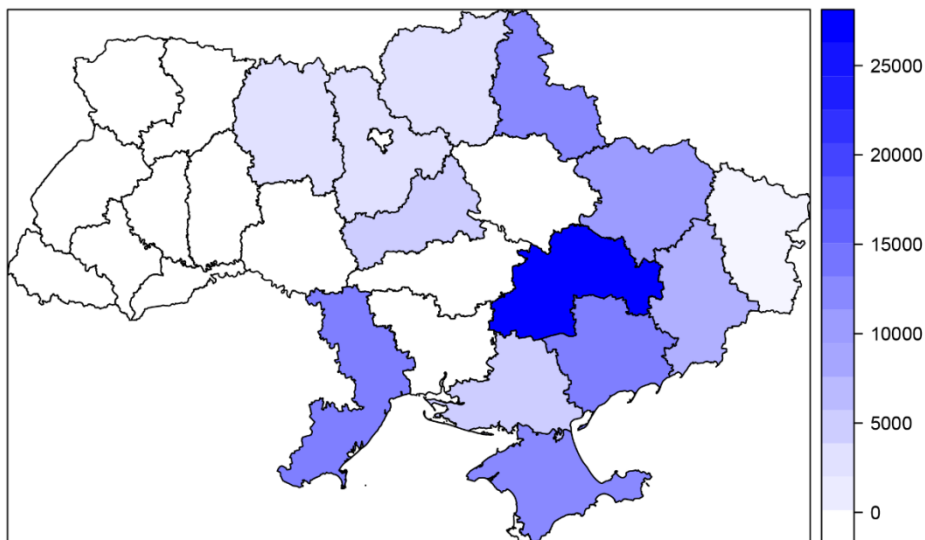


**Figure 9: Protest intensity**

**Figure 10. Regional protests supportive of Russia's agenda in Ukraine**



**Figure 11. Regional protests supportive of Euromaidan and challenging Russia's intervention in Ukraine**



**Note to protest data in figures 10 and 11:** The data were compiled from Russian and Ukrainian media sources, including both Ukrainian- and Russian-language sources. They cover protests occurring across Ukraine in the period between February and September 2014. Our objective was to capture the regional dimension of mobilization and counter-mobilization in Ukraine during the period between Yanukovich's flight from Kiev and the weeks following Russia's annexation of Crimea and onset of separatist violence in the Donbas. This mapping exercise also allows us to get a sense of the broader pattern of mobilization in the country going beyond the Euromaidan, which has formed the focus of much of the scholarly analysis of protest dynamics during the crisis. Each protest report was cross-checked against other sources for accuracy. In compiling the



data, the following general definition of protests was employed. Protest refers to a gathering of people with the explicit aim of articulating particular demands publicly in a public space. Among the protest events recorded are several demonstrations organized together with football matches played in the cities (such as in Kharkov on 27 April 2014). Such marches had been organized a day before the football match, with organisers encouraging people to join the protest event before or after the match. A number of protests have had a violent outcome, in that they involved clashes with other groups or the police, or have resulted in occupation of public buildings and death. We include the latter type of protests, but exclude those featuring armed groups whose main objective was to seize local authority buildings and other government offices and assume power in particular localities. The latter type of events would be reported in the Ukrainian media as ‘armed people in masks have seized . . . .’ These events mainly occurred beginning in April 2014 in the Donbas localities.

It is important to note that following the change of government in Kiev (Feb 19-23), some cities explicitly outlawed public gatherings, while other cities have imposed restrictions on public assembly or tended to turn down requests to hold protests from April onwards. These restrictions are likely to have led to a decrease in both the size and frequency of demonstrations. Furthermore, during this time, Ukraine’s new authorities authorised arrests of pro-Russian activists. Likewise, in the Crimea and Donbas activists challenging Russia’s intervention and occupation were also arrested.

Only the protests that could be cross-checked using at least two different sources were included. For the purposes of constructing the protest Figures, we used the most conservative estimates of number of participants recorded in the media. For instance, if a media protest story suggested a range of participants of 7,000-10,000 people, we used the figure of 7,000. Likewise, if a story featured a reference to ‘several hundred’ participants, we used the most conservative figure of 200. In recording the protest data, we provide a link to media stories from which the data were derived. These data are available from the authors upon request.