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Russia and Ukraine in the mirror of each other's TV channels

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Abstract. TV channels of each country usually report international news differently according to the citizen's interests and foreign policy priorities of said country. Thus, foreign policy conflicts can be covered in multiple ways, this fact obviously does not contribute to their resolution. Research focuses on the coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation by the state-owned channels of these countries in 2014–2016. The samples include all news related to Ukraine on the Russian TV channel (Russia 1) and Russia on the Ukrainian channel (UA First) during seven weeks when the selected key events occurred. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were used. All news items were classified into four categories: political news, military news, economic news, social news. The considerable influence of national interest on media frames were shown. Russian and Ukrainian journalists were similarly interested in each other's events, even if the news of the moment was not directly related to the conflict. Both TV channels covered important global news, however they often selected different events which would be interesting for their national audience or related to their country's foreign policy. The both channels had been gradually losing interest in Russian-Ukrainian crisis up to 2015.

Keywords: Russian television, Ukrainian television, Ukrainian crisis, framing, news agenda, information warfare

Conflicts of interest. The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Россия и Украина во взаимном ТВ-информировании

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Аннотация. Национальные телевизионные каналы обычно отбирают и представляют международные новости в соответствии с интересами граждан своих стран и приоритетами внешней политики. В процессе освещения международных конфликтов для зрителей

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создаются противоположные реальности, что не способствует разрешению конфликтов. Цель исследования – проанализировать освещение российско-украинского конфликта государственными каналами этих стран в 2014–2016 гг. В эмпирическую базу вошли сюжеты вечерних выпусков телевизионных новостей, связанные с Украиной, на российском телеканале («Россия 1») и материалы, в которых упоминалась Россия, на украинском телеканале (UA First) в течение семи недель, когда произошли выбранные ключевые события. Использовался количественный и качественный анализ. Все новости были разделены на четыре категории: политические, военные, экономические, социальные. Выявлено значительное влияние национальных интересов на освещение актуальных событий в период конфронтации между странами. И российские, и украинские журналисты в значительной степени проявляли интерес к событиям в стране-оппоненте, даже если текущие новости не имели прямого отношения к конфликту. В случае важных мировых событий они освещались обоими телеканалами. Наряду с этим журналисты часто рассказывали о том, что могло быть интересно их национальной аудитории или было обусловлено внешней политикой. Обнаружено, что оба канала постепенно теряют интерес к российско-украинскому кризису к 2015 г.

Ключевые слова: российское телевидение, украинское телевидение, украинский кризис, фрейминг, информационная повестка, информационная война

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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Introduction

Reconstruction of media reality under conflict of interests

In the era of globalization, objective media coverage of international news is a priority, because it is the media that is the source of news about events that are beyond personal experience (Lippmann, 1991). However, can media reconstruct an objective picture of reality, if reported on international news? Researchers increasingly respond negatively to this question (e.g. Dolgova, 2020; Curran et al., 2017; Nossek, 2004; Thussu, 2019), especially if it concerns covering events from countries in conflict (McQuail, 2010; Aday, 2017).

Especially during military confrontations the media has been used as a “soft power” from the very beginning of time. The end of the 20th century – the early the 21st century is also associated with a large number of international conflicts. One of them, the Ukraine crisis. Even before the acute phase of the confrontation in 2022 many researchers blame only Russia for what happened in Ukraine (Peters, 2018), some consider the conflict occurred as a result of the imbalance of forces between the major powers after the end of the cold war (Sauer, 2017), as well as internal contradictions within Ukraine and many other external and internal factors (Boyd-Barrett, 2017; Pikulicka-Wilczewska, Sakwa, 2015).

Anyway, for Russia, Ukraine is not only the closest neighbor. These are two countries which have a common history, economic and cultural past. Many Russians have relatives and friends in Ukraine, the same goes for Ukrainians. Thus, information about events in neighboring countries can be received not only from

the media, but also via personal contacts. Media is not the only source of information. Consequently, TV couldn't act according a "hegemonic model". The latter means that media provide information based only on the authorities' position that provokes the bias informing and even the misinforming (Zollmann, 2015). However, we want to point out that many studies prove the opposite: the media was used in both Russia and Ukraine as an information weapon during the conflict from the very beginning.

It is also worth noting the uniqueness of the situation under investigation: there was no open military confrontation between Russia and Ukraine in 2014–2016, but relations were significantly deteriorated after series of events. The information warfare was called "hybrid war" (Khaldarova, Pantti, 2016; Pasitselska, 2017).

News selection vs presentation

Contemporary studies on media coverage of military conflicts show that journalists routinely escape their professional standards of work (especially if the conflict concerns the country where they work). The narrative mostly depends on the foreign policy of the country (Tumber, Palmer, 2004; Ravi, 2005, Vukasovich & Dejanovic-Vukasovich, 2016). However, researchers who are following the humanistic paradigm express the hope that it is the media which can help to resolve the conflict (Arno, 2019), and keep on looking for ways "achieve 'better' or 'higher' standards of wartime reporting" (Robinson et al., 2016). Obviously, considering international news coverage as a part of international communication we should believe that information and ideas can be an important factor that stimulates universal mutual understanding and helps to resolve global problems. But we agree that "more often channels of international communication have been used... to promote the economic and political interests of the world's powerful nations" (Cottle, 2006; McChesney, 2008; Thussu, 2019) and not only by the powerful ones.

Thus, the impossibility of complete objectivity even in news content is widely recognized (e.g. Shoemaker, Reese, 1996; Gerbner, 1964). However, it is necessary to distinguish between the gatekeeping process (Shoemaker et al., 2009) or the news selection and their processing and presentation. In the first case, a reporter chooses events that will become news and is mostly guided by professional standards that numerous researchers, starting with Galtung & Ruge (1965), have tried to systematize. Thus, in the case of relevant, large-scale event it would be covered, even if there is a difference in the attitude of journalists. Simultaneously news processing and presentation give more opportunities for interpreting and framing (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). It may be especially important in the course of information warfare.

Currently there is a significant amount of works devoted to the media coverage of the Ukrainian crisis 2014–2016. Most of them are related to the Russian propaganda study (Khaldarova, Pantti, 2016; Peisakhin, Rozenas, 2018). However, the Russian media discourse in the relation to Ukraine was not only negative in this period. Gulenko notes that the Russian socio-political talk shows blamed mostly the Ukrainian government, and sympathized Ukrainian people under these circumstances (2021). In our opinion, in the course of studying the information war, it is necessary to analyze the media of all countries involved. Not many works

do that this way. I should mention the research of Roman, Buniak, Wanta (2017), which studied the eastern Ukraine military conflict coverage in Russian, Ukraine and US newscasts and revealed that all media presented different pictures of reality depending on leading media outlet.

Our research examined the media's picture of reality in dynamics during 2014–2016 that allowed to investigate the change of priorities in media policy. Besides, the combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis helped to analyze the specifics of the news selection and presentation.

Methodology

To investigate the media reality constructed by the Ukrainian and Russian newscasts about each other we combined qualitative and quantitative analysis of state-owned TV channel's newscasts in both countries. For our research we chose Russia 1 and UA First. We are sure that it is necessary to compare only TV channels of the same form of ownership and type of content.

Russia 1 is one of the main state-owned, general interest Russian channels (Dolgova et al., 2021).

UA First is the main Ukrainian state-owned channel, since 2015 labeling as a public channel but nevertheless being a 100% state-owned company.

Our samples include evening news Vesti [News] and Itogi dnya [The day results]. We studied Russian TV channel plots that told about the Ukrainian events, as well as stories about Russia (mentioned Russia) that appeared on the Ukrainian TV channel. A total of 499 plots were investigated.

Our research was conducted during seven weeks of 2014, 2015 and the first half of 2016 when key events occurred. We marked as key events those that were the most important for both countries.

In 2014:

- accession of the Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation;
- the start of the anti-terrorist operation in eastern Ukraine;
- the crash of the Malaysian airliner in eastern Ukraine.

In 2015:

- extension of sanctions against Russia;
- a food blockade of Crimea.

In 2016:

- results of the formal investigation into the Malaysian plane crash near Donetsk.

We analyzed evening news during the whole week when the key event happened. We used the quantitative content-analysis and qualitative analysis, which allowed us to compare the news selection and their presentation on state-owned TV channels during Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014–2016. All stories were thematically classified into the following categories: “political news”, “economic news”, “military news”, “social news”. The priority of a particular theme was analyzed.

We formulated the following hypotheses:

H.1. Key news were usually related to both countries, so both channel agendas would be quite similar. Guided by the general professional standards journalists would choose similar events to cover.

H.2. There were differences in the agenda when not really important, global events occurred.

Results and discussion

Classifying plots into categories, we found a similar number of news in each division for both countries (Table 1, 2).

Table 1

Accession of the Republic of Crimea to Russian Federation, 2014

Date	Type of news							
	Political		Military		Economic		Social	
	R	UA	R	UA	R	UA	R	UA
17.03	5	8	2	2	1	1	1	0
18.03	5	7	0	1	1	0	3	0
19.03	4	9	3	2	2	0	0	0
20.03	8	10	0	0	2	1	0	0
21.03	8	5	1	1	1	0	0	0

As a rule, in case of the most significant, global, valuable for both countries and the world community events, Russian and Ukrainian channels told about them as news. The selected key events were widely covered by both newscasts. For example, in the week from 17 to 21 March 2014 the accession (annexation) of the Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation was the key event for Ukrainian and Russian newscasts. Ukrainian journalists reported on the referendum and pondered about the future of the Peninsula as well. The Russian ones also covered disorder in Ukrainian cities and the comments of Ukrainian politicians about the Crimea.

Seven plots of Russian TV were related with sanction against Russian politics and businessmen in connection with the annexation of Crimea. Ukrainian television had only two plots about this news. During this time stories classified as “military” were devoted to skirmishes between the Russian and Ukrainian military in the Crimea. Russian TV also reported illegal actions of the Ukrainian military in Ukrainian cities and the Ukrainian TV covered the National Guard’s recruitment. Significant social news on Russian television in this period was the celebration of the accession of the Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation.

Table 2

The start of the anti-terrorist operation in eastern Ukraine, 2014

Date	Type of news							
	Political		Military		Economic		Social	
	R	UA	R	UA	R	UA	R	UA
14.04	6	6	5	6	0	1	0	0
15.04	4	5	10	7	0	1	0	0
16.04	4	5	7	7	0	0	1	0
17.04	4	5	2	7	3	0	1	1
18.04	5	5	4	4	0	0	0	0

Since the beginning of the anti-terrorist operation in eastern Ukraine political plots had been replaced by military stories from eastern Ukraine (Table 2). Nevertheless, during the analyzed week, 23 political stories were aired by Russian newscasts and 31 by Ukrainian ones. All of them related to the Ukraine authorities’

decisions about protests in eastern Ukraine as well as the negotiation about the eastern Ukrainian conflict in Geneva. Both TV channels covered military news from eastern Ukraine: protests and skirmishes with the Ukrainian National Guard.

At the same time, we found a significant amount of differences in the TV channels news agenda. For example, Russian journalists also told about the Ukrainian's law prohibiting Russian men aged 16 to 60 from entering the country. Besides, in this time Russian television was more concerned about the problem of the gas contract between Russia and Ukraine during this period (three plots). While the Ukrainian television was more worried about the fall of the Russian ruble and places for summer recreation (alternatives to Crimea).

Journalists were interested in different events covering social topics. For example, Russian TV channel reported the celebration of 70th anniversary of the liberation from Nazi Germany in Yalta and the Nazis in today's Ukraine. Ukrainian TV, in turn, told about flashmobs against Russian goods and gasoline.

Both Russian and Ukrainian TV channels were paying significant attention this week to military news: the fighting in the South-East of Ukraine and the crash of the Malaysian plane (Table 3). It is also important to note that the number of these types of plots had increased on Russian television on the day of the disaster. On Ukrainian TV their amount was about the same throughout the week.

Table 3

The crash of the Malaysian airliner in eastern Ukraine, 2014

Date	Type of news							
	Political		Military		Economic		Social	
	R	UA	R	UA	R	UA	R	UA
14.07	5	0	6	10	0	0	0	1
15.07	2	2	5	7	0	0	0	3
16.07	4	1	4	11	0	0	1	1
17.07	3	0	11	13	2	1	0	0
18.07	6	1	10	10	0	0	0	0

The issues of refugees' resettlement from the Donbass in Russia, the BRICs and EU summits and the UN Security Council meeting, politicians' comments on the main news were important on the Russian TV political agenda. Ukrainian television also touched EU summit and the UN Security Council and covered the difficulties for crimeans with the return of bank deposits.

The two economic newscasts on the Russian channel were related to sanctions (Ukrainian TV had one such story). In this week our sample got a plot about the great interest of Russian viewers to the news from Ukraine. Apparently, Ukrainians were also interested in news from Russia. The accident in the Moscow metro occupied a significant place on the Ukrainian TV social agenda.

During 2015–2016 we found less TV stories about each other on Russian and Ukrainian TV (Tables 4–7). Besides, since the start of the anti-terrorist operation military themes occupied a significant place in television news, especially on Ukrainian TV. During this period both newscasts covered ceasefire violations and problems on the Luhansk and Donetsk borders. Ukrainian journalists also told about the National Guard's mobilization and eastern Ukrainian refugees' problems.

Table 4

Extension of sanctions against Russia, 2015

Date	Type of news							
	Political		Military		Economic		Social	
	R	UA	R	UA	R	UA	R	UA
22.06	5	0	4	5	3	1	1	0
23.06	4	2	4	5	1	0	0	0
24.06	2	1	2	5	1	2	0	0
25.06	3	3	2	3	1	0	0	0
26.06	0	0	3	3	1	0	0	0

Both channels’ political plots covered the meeting of foreign Ministers of Normandy Four country. Russian journalists reported the session of the Russian Public chamber (discussing Crimea’s problems), Russia and Greece relationship. Ukrainians mentioned UN General Assembly meeting. Economic plots covered sanctions against Russia and anti-sanctions. Ukrainian journalists informed the cancellation of discounts on Russian gas. Russian TV also told about the concert of a famous pianist in Donetsk.

During this period, we started to mark the difference in the events to be chosen to be covered (Table 5).

Table 5

A food blockade of the Crimea, 2015

Date	Type of news							
	Political		Military		Economic		Social	
	R	UA	R	UA	R	UA	R	UA
21.09	4	2	0	3	0	0	0	0
22.09	4	4	1	3	1	0	0	0
23.09	1	2	2	2	0	0	0	0
24.09	0	0	0	4	1	0	0	0
25.09	3	3	1	3	1	3	0	0

For Russian journalists Ukrainian news was mostly political news. Ukrainian ones mentioned Russia covering military conflict in the eastern part of the country.

Nevertheless, we have found some events which were interesting as news for both channels. Russian and Ukrainian newscasts covered the food blockade of the Crimea, the prohibition on flights of Russian airlines to and through Ukraine, the trial of Maria Savchenko, negotiations on Russian gas supplies to Ukraine.

Russian TV reported DPR and LPR election (political news) and the Ukrainian decision to stop paying the Ukrainian debt (economic news). In turn, Ukrainian news told about renaming streets with Communist names (political news) and the consequences of the Crimean blockade (economic news).

The geography of military plots was quite wide: Russian TV covered riots in Kharkov, the takeover of the Orthodox Church near Ternopol by the Ukrainian National Guard and the Ukrainian nationalist political party “Pravyi Sektor” (“Right sector”) and the NTV journalist in captivity of the “Pravyi Sektor”.

Ukrainian TV mostly told about ceasefire and Donbass' reconstruction, the national guard' soldiers' demands for pensions and salaries, riots in Kiev by battalion "Azov".

During this period both TV channels informed about closing the airspace of Ukraine for Russia, the Russian and Dutch versions of the Malaysian plane crash. Russian newscasts also told about the destruction of the exhibition "People of the Maidan" in Riga, the March of Ukrainian nationalists on the Kiev's streets on the UPA's birthday, new facts of the shooting of "Nebesnaya sotnya" ("Celestial Hundred"). In turn, Ukrainian journalists reported Ukraine's accession to the UN Security Council, continuation of electricity supplies to the occupied Crimea.

As "military" were classified Russian news about search operations of a Ukrainian soldier on the territory of the LPR and DPR, the withdrawal of heavy weapons in LPR. Ukrainian TV told about ceasefire violations in Donbass, civilian mines casualties, the memorial in memory of ATO soldiers, benefits to the ATO soldiers and the resumption of social security payments in the Donbass.

Table 6

Results of the formal investigation into the Malaysian plane crash near Donetsk, 2015

Date	Type of news							
	Political		Military		Economic		Social	
	R	UA	R	UA	R	UA	R	UA
12.10	1	2	0	2	0	0	0	0
13.10	3	4	0	2	0	0	0	0
14.10	2	0	1	4	0	0	0	0
15.10	2	1	1	2	0	0	0	0
16.10	2	2	0	1	0	0	0	0

Table 7

EU-Ukraine Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, 2016

Date	Type of news							
	Political		Military		Economic		Social	
	R	UA	R	UA	R	UA	R	UA
01.01	3	2	1	1	0	0	0	0
02.01	2	1	1	1	1	0	0	0
03.01	2	1	0	2	0	0	0	0
04.01	4	1	0	1	0	1	0	0
05.01	2	2	0	1	0	0	0	0

The last key event occurred during the holidays, when, as a rule, there are few events important enough. Both channels covered the establishing EU-Ukraine Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area and import duty on Russian goods. Newscasts also told about problems of the Crimea with electricity, DPR and LPR 's ceasefire violations on holidays. Russian journalists reported the Russian gas price decrease for Ukraine, Ukraine stopping water supply to the Luhansk region, economic outcomes for Europe from sanctions against Russia.

Conclusion

During the crisis 2014–2016 a lot of Ukrainian international news was related just to Russia and Russian newscasts told much about Ukraine as well. This is largely due to the fact that the conflict that had occurred strongly affected both countries, which in the past were closely interconnected with each other. The both channels had been gradually losing interest in Russian-Ukrainian crisis up to 2015 after the Minsk agreements. The conflict was frozen, but not resolved.

During the period under investigation, political news was the most popular in Russian state-owned media. However, we can say that the both TV channels focused equal attention on this type of stories in 2014. Nevertheless, further the number of political plots on Ukrainian television has decreased. Moreover, military stories were in priority in Ukrainian media agenda during two first years of the conflict in Ukraine. In 2016 political and military plots had similar value.

The analysis showed that journalists covered the same events, especially when they were really significant, key events, widely covered on international media. Nevertheless, there were differences in the agenda when not really important global events occurred. In these cases, news' selection was related to the country's foreign policy and the channel's information policy. Both journalists were interested in the events of their neighbors, which can be unimportant for national audience, but related to the channels information policy. As an example, we can mention news about the Russian ruble's fall on Ukraine TV. In some cases, the difference in the news agenda can be explained by the audience's interest as well. The maximum polarization of the topics was observed at the end of the summer of 2014.

The conflicting relationship between the countries is one of the serious challenges for the media: the rejection of biased coverage means the loss of the information war. Therefore, no one does this, and does not fail. That is why the further study of conflict coverage in the humanistic paradigm, within which it would be possible to develop common rules for all media, seems very promising.

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Bio note:

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