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Constructing Crises in Europe: Multifaceted Securitisation in Times  
of Exception

# Constructing Nazis on Political Demand: Agenda-Setting and Framing in Russian State- Controlled TV Coverage of the Euromaidan, Annexation of Crimea and the War in Donbas

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## Abstract

*The central role of mass communication in the construction of crises, threats and enemies was acknowledged decades ago. In those cases when media reporting about crises, threats and enemies is studied, it is predominately done based on the media content from Western liberal democracies. The article broadens the usual framework of research on this topic by empirically studying the securitisation and enmification campaign performed by TV channels of an autocracy through the lens of agenda-setting and framing theories. In other words, this article helps understand how the Russian regime securitises political issues and constructs enemies. In particular, eight weekly news programmes by Russian state-controlled Channel One Russia and RT (former Russia Today) covering the period of the Euromaidan, Annexation of Crimea*

*and the war in Donbas are studied in order to address the question of how the channels' strategies of setting their agendas and framing the covered events contributed to the construction of a Nazi enemy that has to be fought.*

**Keywords:** *Russian TV, agenda-setting, framing, constructing enemies, securitisation in Russia, Euromaidan, Annexation of Crimea, war in Donbas*

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## Introduction

Eight years after the illegal Annexation of Crimea, and the beginning of the de-facto war in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, on 24 February 2022, Russia launched the full-scale war against Ukraine. The Russian regime tried to justify it by the alleged need to fight so-called 'Nazis' in the Ukrainian government (Putin 2022). Several days later, EU vs Disinformation project posted the graph with the details about references to 'Nazi' in Russian state-controlled media over time; the graph revealed that within a week before the full-scale invasion, the number of references to 'Nazi' increased more than fourfold: from fewer than 60 tags per day on 17 February 2022 to more than 240 on 24 February 2022 (EU vs Disinformation 2022). Even if one believes in the Russia-promoted false narrative about Nazi-ruled Ukraine, the dramatic increase in references to Nazis in Russian state-controlled media is hard to explain by noticeable changes happening in the Ukrainian government at least because there were no such changes during that week. At the same time, the knowledge about media performance in autocracies (Stier 2015), allows stating that authoritarian regimes have a power to shift the media agenda in the desired direction. It is the case of the Russian ruling regime that controls media agenda (including agenda about Nazis). In the light of this statement, the above-mentioned changes could rather be explained by the state-controlled information preparations of the Russian regime to the full-scale war and the regime's attempts to justify it.

After the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the Russian regime de-facto introduced war censorship, blocked remaining critical media outlets (currently those still operating are available only via virtual private network (VPN) or in the form of mobile applications), introduced charges for criticising the Russian army, etc.<sup>1</sup> However, the targeted assault on regime-critical media outlets has its roots in 2014, when TVRain was disconnected from most of Russian TV networks, Galina Timchenko, the then editor-in-chief of a popular online news

<sup>1</sup> (2022): Prezident Podpisal Zakon Ob Otvetstvennosti Za Rasprostranenie Fejkov o Dejstviyax VS RF [The President Signed the Law on Responsibility for Spreading Fakes about the Actions of the RF Armed Forces]. Duma.Gov.Ru, 3 April, <accessed online: <http://duma.gov.ru/news/53632/>>.

outlet Lenta.ru was fired, etc.; or even earlier, at the beginning of the 2000s, when the popular pluralistic channel NTV was taken under the control of the Gazprom media group. For years, Russian state-controlled media outlets, including those broadcasting for a non-Russian audience, have been studied in the context of fake news, disinformation, propaganda and promoting the imperial idea of the so-called 'Russian World' (O'Loughlin, Toal & Kolosov 2016; Ramsay & Robertshaw 2019; Onuch et al. 2021; Erlich & Garner 2023). The focus of the article at hand adds to that branch of literature by showing exactly how the strategic application of two communication effects allowed the Russian regime to create a perversion of reality and to build the ground for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The case of Russia and its communication of political issues is not unique: when any autocratic elite has control over mass media (for example, through direct ownership, pressure, censorship or/and with the help of loyal figures from within the media outlets), it also has the privilege to turn public communication about (potential) crises, threats and enemies into a tool serving the elite's political goals (Dukalskis 2017; Dukalskis & Patane 2019). In other words, when performed by state-controlled media outlets of an autocracy, both construction of threats (*securitisation*) (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998), and construction of enemies (*enmification*) (Rieber & Kelly 1991) reflect the real-life developments to a lesser extent than they reflect the regime's goals. The autocratic construction of threats and enemies is done with the help of the state-controlled setting of media agenda and media frames, i.e. state-controlled selection of events which are covered by media outlets, and of the particular angles of the coverage (Field et al. 2018).

Despite the central role which mass communication plays in the processes of securitisation and enmification (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998; Williams 2003), international relations scholars are said to pay limited attention to the achievements of the theories of mass communication (Gilboa 2008), while the construction of threats and enemies is, in general, rarely empirically studied on the basis of media content, especially in non-Western and non-democratic contexts (Schäfer, Scheffran & Penniket 2016). The article fills this gap by studying autocratic securitisation and enmification in the news coverage of the Euromaidan, the Annexation of Crimea and the first months of the war in Donbas with the help of agenda-setting and framing theories: the news coverage by Channel One Russia and RT – two Russian state-controlled TV channels – is analysed. The list of owners of Channel One Russia includes both the Russian state and regime-friendly entities, while RT is a Russian international broadcaster owned and funded by the state. Personalities associated with the analysed channels are also known for supporting the Russian regime, for example, Margarita Simonian,

the editor-in-chief of RT, is one of the figures explicitly supporting Russia's war against Ukraine in Russian public discourse.<sup>2</sup>

The main focus of the empirical part of the article is the construction of enemies out of Ukrainian political actors, with the main attention on constructed enemies allegedly having Nazi features. References to Nazism is a known feature of Russian state-controlled communication, and various researchers have analysed the use of the Nazi frame by the Russian regime (Gaufman 2017; Edele 2017; Shevtsova 2022). However, the central role of the Nazi frame in the attempts of the Russian regime to justify its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 creates a need for an updated conceptualisation of this frame, its origin and its transformation. In this aspect the article serves as a contextual piece showing the origin and roots of a frame receiving close attention from scholars in the post-February-2022 period (Marples 2022; Ferraro 2023; Kuzio 2023). As a whole, the article suggests an approach complementing the more widespread narrative-based research of communication about international relations and has the potential to make conclusions resulting from narrative-based research more comprehensive. For example, while Myshlovska (2022) analyses the nature and evolution of competing official narratives regarding the Russo-Ukrainian conflict (2014-2022), the article at hand offers some insights into how Russian state-controlled media outlets strengthened Russian narratives by constructing enemies out of Ukrainian political actors in the eyes of the Russian and international publics. Moreover, in addition to analysing the enemies constructed by Russian state-controlled media, the chosen empirical approach addresses the question of how exactly those enemies were created.

The methodology of the empirical part of the article is based on critical discourse analysis (CDA). News programmes broadcast after the following four turning points of the Euromaidan, the Annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions are analysed: (1) the programme from 26 January 2014 – the weekly news programme following the killings of the first Euromaidan protesters in the centre of Kyiv;<sup>3</sup> (2) the programme from 2 March 2014 – the weekly news programme after Russian forces took the Ukrainian Crimean Peninsula under 'effective control';<sup>4</sup> (3) the programme from 13 April 2014 – the weekly news programme following the seizure of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk by

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2 (2023): Head of RT Discusses Russia's Goals, <accessed online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FvhHL5Cn3N8>>

3 Use of Force in the Policing of Demonstrations. Prohibition of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment (Article 3) (2021: 9). The European Court of Human Rights. [https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/FS\\_Force\\_demonstrations\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/FS_Force_demonstrations_ENG.pdf)

4 The European Court of Human Rights (2021): Complaints Brought by Ukraine against Russia Concerning a Pattern of Human Rights Violations in Crimea Declared Partly Admissible. Press Release Issued by the Registrar of the Court.

Russian and Russia-backed forces;<sup>5</sup> (4) the programme from 20 July 2014 – the weekly news programme following the downing of Flight MH-17 by the Russian Buk missile system (Toal & O’Loughlin 2018).

The CDA showed that in the case of each of the analysed programmes, Russian state-controlled TV channels applied a politically-motivated strategy of agenda-setting and framing: they silenced events that might show Russia (and its allies) in a bad light or assign Russia some responsibility or blame for the events happening in Ukraine; they turned relatively minor topics strengthening the regime-friendly framing of the covered events into ‘top stories’; they framed Ukrainian actors as those causing the crisis situations even in the situations when Russia’s actions against Ukraine qualified as a violation of international law; they turned information about the alleged threats coming from Ukrainian actors into one of the most salient elements of the news coverage; they portrayed Ukrainian actors as Nazis; they heavily relied on discretionary historical references in order to contextualise the covered events in a way fruitful for Russian regime. The comparison of those elements in the news coverage of Channel One Russia and RT showed that Russian state-controlled agenda-setting and framing noticeably differed in aspects allowing these channels to adjust to the information environments in which their audiences live.

The article has its roots in the author’s upcoming monograph about the construction of enemies by Russian state-controlled media. The attention of this article to the role of agenda-setting and framing in the process of the state-controlled construction of crises, threats and enemies is the development of the previous research where this aspect was not the main focus. Still, due to the similarity of the topics addressed in the monograph and in the article at hand, some non-textual self-repetitions are possible.

The paper consists of a theoretical section diving into two central theoretical concepts used to develop a theoretical framework for the article – securitisation and enmification, and explaining how agenda-setting and framing can be used by autocratic regimes to construct threats and enemies. The theoretical section is followed by details on data and methods, and the findings’ section gives the reader insights from topic-relevant content broadcast by Russian state-controlled TV channels. The concluding section, in its turn, offers interpretations of the findings in the context of the construction of a Nazi enemy in the news reporting about the Euromaidan, the Annexation of Crimea and the War

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5 Council Regulation (EU) No 269/2014 of 17 March 2014 Concerning Restrictive Measures in Respect of Actions Undermining or Threatening the Territorial Integrity, Sovereignty and Independence of Ukraine (2014: 20). Official Journal of the European Union. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A02014R0269-20211213>.

in Donbas, and draws lines between that reporting and the current attempts of Russian regime to justify full-scale war against Ukraine.

### **Theoretical framework: Enemies on political demand**

Theorists of securitisation argue that threats are not objective but socially constructed, and that it is not the particular circumstances that make certain situations appear threatening in the public eye, but rather the respective public communication about these situations, including the availability and salience of information about risks which these situations are causing (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998). Moreover, despite the conditions (up to those endangering people's well-being or even lives), the public might feel safe unless the threats are communicated.

For example, due to the decision of the Soviet regime to silence the explosion at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant on 26 April 1986, as well as to silence the significant health-related risks of this event, predominately citizens of the Soviet Union were not aware of the risks, did not apply any precautions and even massively took part in outdoor 'Labour Day' demonstrations on 1 May 1986 (Taylor 2013). The false feeling of being safe did not prevent the public from being exposed to radiation. In this particular case, radiation is what the critics of the Copenhagen School would call an 'objective threat' – something inherently dangerous, no matter whether the public sees it as such or not (Knudsen 2001).

Still, as this article focuses on *purposeful* construction of threats and enemies for political reasons, it is important to note that with the help of threatening framing, any *ordinary* issue has a chance to be turned into a dangerous one in the perception of the public. The same can be said about enmification, i.e. about the threatening framing of not an issue but of a political actor: despite its features and/or actions, political actors might be framed as enemies of the public with the help of respective communication, in this sense, construction of enemies could be considered as an instance of securitisation and seen as a crucial element of confrontation between international actors (Rieber & Kelly 1991; Williams 2003).

When the enmification is successful, it will influence the political process at least by making people vote or support politicians promising to protect the public and to confront the enemy. In autocratic states, those where power is concentrated in the hands of a relatively limited number of people (ruling elites), and where citizens do not enjoy the right for free elections, successful enmification performed by ruling elites also has its outcomes: it legitimises and stabilises the regime, and is likely to unite citizens in their fear and hatred towards the constructed enemy (Dukalskis 2017).

In autocracies, the ruling elites usually have influence (if not the control) over major media outlets (Stier 2015). In such conditions, the public has limited access to the alternative information about political actors which are portrayed as

enemies by state-controlled media. As a result of state-controlled information flow, in autocracies enmification has a better chance to be successful than in democracies (Oppenheimer 2006). From a communication perspective, limiting alternative information and underlining threatful features of the constructed enemy, first of all requires a strategic approach to media agenda-setting and to media frames selection.

*How media agenda and frames help to construct crises, threats and enemies?* For decades after it was conceptualised, agenda-setting – one of the most known media effects – was challenged, broadened, extended and adjusted to the new communication realities; still it remains the central element of discussions about the influence of media on public opinion about politics (Perloff 2022). This influence is said to lie in the fact that by making decisions about which topic to cover and which to not, and how intense the coverage of the topic should be, media outlets ‘shap[e] political reality’ (McCombs & Shaw 1972: 176). Because of the above-mentioned reasons – such as the limited access to the alternative information – in autocracies the influence of state-controlled media agenda on public perception of political reality is usually stronger than in democracies (Stier 2015). The (somewhat) exaggerated explanation of the phenomena could go as follows: *when citizens of an autocracy are getting informed by state-controlled media outlets, the events which are not covered by those outlets are not known to the wide public, as if they have never happened.*

As a result, it is the politically-motivated setting of media agenda that allows media outlets (1) to draw public’s attention to the securitised issue and/or to the enmified actor, as well as (2) to cover only those developments of the crisis situation and only those features of the enmified political actor which lay in line with regime’s communication strategy.

The close public attention to the desired topic can, as a rule, be achieved by the intense media coverage. For example, the research by Wanta, Golan and Lee (2004) shows that media agenda influences the perceptive importance of actors and issues in the public eye. In particular, ‘[t]he more media coverage a [foreign] nation received, the more likely respondents were to think the nation was vitally important . . .’ (Wanta, Golan & Lee 2004: 364). As for the second aspect, the selective coverage is also achieved by the strategic control over media agenda, that includes not just the silencing of regime-critical voices but also the silencing of those developments of the crisis situation and those features of enmified political actors which contradict or blur a regime’s arguments about the covered topic. The strategic control over media agenda-setting is exemplified by the autocratic communication response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic: at the beginning, state-controlled media outlets of some of the autocracies silenced



the risks of the coronavirus, while later in the course of the pandemic, the media outlets' focus shifted to glorifying the ruling regimes by intensively communicating their successes in fighting COVID-19 (Stasavage 2020; Nino et al. 2021).

Due to the interconnection of media effects, the strategic approach to setting a media agenda is usually combined with the strategic approach to media framing (Weaver 2007). While state-controlled agenda-setting is widely understood as the politically-motivated process of selecting topics which are to be covered, state-controlled framing is responsible for underlining 'desired' aspects of those topics. As Entman puts it:

[t]o frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (1993: 52).

In situations when both media agenda and media frames serve the communication goals of the autocratic regime, state-controlled media outlets offer their audience the (somewhat) distorted reflection of political reality. Sure, even the most independent media outlet is not capable of fully reflecting 'the reality' at least because any media outlet has to make decisions about its media agenda (Pörksen, Koeck & Koeck 2011). Still, the task of the independent media outlets assigned to them by the public is to constantly aim for balance and objectivity in representing 'the reality' (Hallin & Mancini 2004), while the task of state-controlled media outlets assigned to them by the regime is to construct and strengthen a version of 'the reality' assisting the regime's goals (Dukalskis 2017; Leafstedt 2021).

In case state-controlled communication efforts are directed at the construction of enemies, the political and societal outcomes of non-free information flow tend to go beyond the stabilisation of the autocratic regime: when enmification is successful, it constructs and/or cultivates fear and hatred directed towards a particular actor (e.g. towards a country, nation, social group), which may increase the risk of violent conflict at least due to the fact that the recipients of successful enmifying messages tend to be motivated to fight the hostilely-framed actor (Ivlie, 2003; Hoffmann & Hawkins 2015). Historical examples reveal that fear- and hatred-based violent conflicts may also take the form of collective (group) violence such as mass killings and genocides (Staub 2000).

## **Data and methods**

The empirical part of the article is organised around the analysis of the news coverage of the events of the Euromaidan, the Annexation of Crimea and the



first months of the war in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. As this article is written after 24 February 2022, i.e. after the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the selection of the news coverage from 2014 for the analysis requires additional argumentation.

First and foremost, Russian public polls show that it was during 2014 when drastic changes in the attitude of Russians towards Ukraine happened. In particular, in January 2014, 66% of Russians had (predominately) positive attitude towards Ukraine, while in January 2015, 64% of Russians had (predominately) negative attitude towards Ukraine (Levada Center 2015).

In her research of Russian state-controlled TV coverage of a similar period, Khaldarova (2021) argues that around 2014 the framing of Ukrainians as 'brothers' turned into the framing of Ukrainians as (dangerous) 'others'. Khaldarova (2021: 9–11) specifies that the Ukrainian government, army, etc. were portrayed more negatively than Ukrainian society as a whole and that there was indeed some share of positive portrayal of Ukrainians on Russian TV (such as strategic claims that fall into the imperial concept of the 'Russian World', for example, those stating that Ukrainians and Russians are an in-group with a 'common history', religious and cultural bonds); at the same time, already during 2014, the radical/fascist/Nazi frame was one of the central frames used to portray Ukrainian society.

Second, events of the Euromaidan, the Annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas are still widely referred to by the Russian regime in its attempts to justify Russian aggression against Ukraine through references to the alleged threats coming from the Postmaidan 'Nazi' Ukrainian government to Russia directly, to people living in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, as well as to Russian-speaking Ukrainians (Putin 2022). Selective references to the events of 2014, as well as state-controlled media framing of those events remain a noticeable feature of Russia's communication strategy (Putin 2021). Therefore, close scholarly attention to the agenda-setting and framing in Russian news coverage of the events happening in Ukraine in 2014 has a potential to shed the light on the genesis of those selective references and frames which have been serving Russia's state-controlled securitisation and enmification. When looked at from this perspective, such a case-related focus doesn't only keep the relevance which it has had since before 24 February 2022 but gets more relevant in a situation when Russia has begun the full-scale attack on the 'Ukrainian Nazi enemy' that Russian state-controlled media has been constructing for years.

In addition to the increasing political and scholarly interest to the Russian information influence in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, the analysed case is also relevant in the broader scholarly context: as examination of state-controlled agenda-setting and framing used for the securitisation and en-

mification. Along with revealing some features of Russian state-controlled communication, the analysis also touches upon the more universal features of the construction of threats and enemies by autocracies-controlled media outlets.

Together with other papers of this special issue, the article at hand deals with the construction of crises and aims at contributing to its fuller interdisciplinary comprehension. The empirical case and the theoretical phenomena analysed in this article are directly linked to several other papers of the volume, for instance, to the paper by Thomas Diez who focuses on different types of securitisation and other contributions dealing with different facets of construction of enemies or securitisation in relation to Russia or Ukraine, such as those by Māris Andžāns, Alina Jašina-Schäfer or Yulia Kurnyshova.

### *Methodology of the analysis*

I analyse weekly news programmes from Channel One Russia and from RT. Their selection as materials for the analysis is explained by channels' relative *similarity* in a sense that both of them are major Russian state-controlled TV channels helping the Russian regime to achieve its communication goals (Hansen 2015; Unwala & Ghori 2015); and, at the same time, by the crucial *differences* between the information environments in which channels' audiences live. The latter fact makes Channel One Russia and RT adjust their communication strategies to their audiences in order to maximise the outcome fruitful for the regime.

The four weekly news programmes broadcast on the following dates on each of the channels were selected for the analysis (eight weekly news programmes altogether): 26 January 2014; 2 March 2014; 13 April 2014; and 20 July 2014. As mentioned above, these were the programmes broadcast in the weeks when (respectively): (1) the first deaths of Euromaidan protesters happened in the centre of Kyiv; (2) Russian forces took 'effective control' over Ukrainian Crimean Peninsula; (3) Russian and Russia-backed forces took control over Sloviansk and Kramatorsk; (4) the Malaysia Airlines plane MH-17 was shot down by the Russian Buk missile system. The events in focus changed the dynamic of the conflict and/or marked the beginning of its new period (as in the case of Russian preparations for the Annexation of Crimea or as with the beginning of the war in Donbas).

When being covered by widely viewed media outlets, those events could potentially shed a negative light on Russia and Russia-affiliated political actors. Therefore, it was decided to study Russian state-controlled agenda-setting and framing in the context of those events with the help of critical discourse analysis (CDA). The analysis was organised around the following research questions: First, how did channels' agenda-setting and framing contribute to the construction of enemies in the analysed crisis communication about the events of the

Euromaidan, the Annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas? Second, how did the channels' enmification-related media frames develop over time?

For the sake of higher transparency of the analysis, the detailed and nuanced section of the findings was separated from the author's generalisations and interpretations (given in the concluding section), while the procedures undertaken for the analysis of the selected news programmes were formalised and unified where possible. In particular, critical analysis of the discourse in all the studied weekly news programmes of Channel One Russia and RT included three following steps: (1) description, analysis and comparison of the channels' agenda of each of the weekly news programmes: what events that are not directly connected to the developments in Ukraine were covered in the weekly news programmes (exhaustive listing), what other events of the Euromaidan/Annexation of Crimea/war in Donbas were reported except for the above-listed four events which are in the focus of this article (deliberately non-exhaustive listing); (2) analysis and comparison of media frames used by the channels in their coverage of other events of the Euromaidan/Annexation of Crimea/war in Donbas: how analysed channels framed those events, how Ukrainian political actors involved in the covered events are portrayed; (3) analysis and comparison of channels' agenda and frames in regard to the four events in focus: what place those events have in the analysed coverage, which frames are used to report about those events and to portray political actors involved in them.

The analysed weekly news programme of Channel One Russia – *Voskresnoe Vremja* – is broadcast on Sundays at 9 pm Moscow Time. *The Weekly* – an analysed news programme on the international TV channel of RT – is also broadcast on Sundays but several times a day, the version of the programme broadcast at 9 pm Central European Time was selected for the analysis. Hosts of the analysed weekly news programmes on RT were changing, as for Channel One Russia, Irada Zeynalova was the host of all four analysed weekly programmes. Weekly news programmes of Channel One Russia (COR) were accessed on the website of the channel, while the weekly news programmes of RT were accessed on the Internet Archive website. For links to the analysed weekly news programmes, see Annex.

## **Findings of the analysis: Russia-friendly combination of silencing and underlining**

### **26 January 2014**

The first news stories to be covered by both channels in the weekly news programmes broadcast on that date were about the Euromaidan protests. 'The most discussed and hot events are happening in Kiev' (00:00-00:04, COR1, 26 January

2014). Slightly more than a fourth of the airtime of the weekly news programme broadcast on that day on Channel One Russia was devoted to the protests, while on RT the share of the news programme about the protests was slightly more than a third. The rest of the weekly programmes broadcast on that date was organised around other topics: on Channel One Russia, other news stories of this weekly news programme were about such topics as the anniversary of the end of the Nazi-blockade of Leningrad during WWII, the attention of Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, to the education and healthcare in Russia, state support of inventions for the Russian military, the collaboration of the military with Russian educational and scientific institutions, preparations for the Winter Olympics that were planned to take place in Russia in February 2014. As for RT, except for the Euromaidan protests, two topics were closely covered by RT in the channel's weekly news programme broadcast on that date: a preliminary agreement between the Syrian government and opposition about the evacuation of civilians from the 'besieged city of Homs', as well as a 'deadly bombing in Egypt' on the third anniversary of the revolution and the riots in this country.

While covering the events of the Euromaidan, on 26 January 2014, both of the channels paid intensive attention to so-called concessions of the then pro-Russian Ukrainian authorities that were said to be trying to solve the conflict peacefully and '[were] trying hard to appease the opposition' (03:06:44, RT, 26 January 2014), but underlined that it did not help to stop the clashes between the protesters and the police because protesters and the opposition did not want to accept the proposed terms and demanded more and more concessions. Both of the channels intensively covered the violence on the side of the protesters, Channel One Russia even reported that the policemen were the *first* victims of the violence and did not even mention any violence coming *from* police. In contrast, the journalist of RT mentioned that the violence was displayed on both sides, but in general this channel's coverage of the violence did not differ much from the coverage of Channel One Russia and was rather another illustration of the channels' general frame about 'people beating police on the ground' (03:10:18, RT, 26 January 2014).

In their weekly news programmes, none of the analysed channels paid attention to the first deaths of the Euromaidan protesters, among them Serhii Nihorian and Mikhail Zhyznevski (ethnic Armenian and ethnic Belarusian respectively) killed that week in the centre of Kyiv. So, the first of the four events that should have been in focus of the empirical part of the article was not covered by the analysed channels. Despite deadly events happening in Ukraine in the course of the week, channels built their Ukraine-related agenda around other events. For example, the anchorperson of RT framed the news about three wounded policemen as RT's top story of the hour, it came about the following events:

‘police say three security personnel were attacked by radical protesters earlier this week . . . all three are now being treated in the hospital’ (03:07:33-03:07:44, RT, 26 January 2014), later, the channel interviewed the wounded policemen (i.e. at the worst, they were conscious and able to talk). When the analysed channels talked about protests, they said that ‘there are nationalists there, there are neo-Nazis there’ (03:10:36 03:10:41, RT, 26 January 2014), that the protesters were having talks about ‘the racial hygiene’ (*chistote nacji*) (00:21, COR1, 26 January 2014), that they are extremists, radicals and terrorists, and that their real leader is ‘the leader (*vozhd*) of Ukrainian Nazis – Stepan Bandera’ (11:32-11:34, COR1, 26 January 2014).

## 2 March 2014

On that date, both of the analysed channels made events happening in Crimea and in the context of Crimea the number one topic of their weekly news programmes. The share of the airtime devoted to the coverage of the situation in Ukraine on 2 March on Channel One Russia was slightly more than two-thirds of the channels’ weekly news programmes broadcast, while on RT – about three-fourths. The only other topics covered by Channel One Russia on that date were the Winter Olympics and the Paralympics that took place in Russia in 2014. The news stories about this topic were, for example, about the ‘extraordinary’ victory of the Russian team that was said to have become possible due to such factors as state support, the newest technologies and Putin’s leading role, not to forget about (how the invited Russian expert put it) ‘the extraordinary will to victory, to something that is in our genes, it is our traditions since the USSR sport . . .’ (4:38-4:46, COR8, 2 March 2014). The channel also paid attention to the motivation of Russian Paralympians saying that the competitions ‘are our Stalingrad, we are ready to die for it’ (05:42-05:44, COR14, 2 March 2014). In contrast, RT’s agenda was less positive and achievement-oriented: when not covering events happening in Ukraine, this channel more or less closely covered deadly clashes in Venezuela underlying that ‘Washington is accused of fuelling the trouble’ there (03:00:51-03:00:55, RT, 2 March 2014), bombings in Nigeria killing dozens of people, anti-governmental protests in Turkey, damage caused by ‘the race for green energy’ in Germany (03:30:37-3:30:38, RT, 2 March 2014), and ‘a controversial’ Christian groups patrolling the streets of London claiming that they ‘want to counter aggressive islamification’ (03:00:56-03:01:02, RT, 2 March 2014), etc.

As mentioned above, on 2 March 2014, the top stories of both of the analysed weekly news programmes were about the situation in Crimea. However, they were not about armed Russian forces taking control over Crimean Parliament and taking the whole territory of Ukraine’s peninsula under their ‘effective con-

trol. These events that were planned to be in focus of the empirical part of the article were also not covered by the analysed channels, similarly to the killings of the first Euromaidan protesters in the centre of Kyiv in January 2014.

Instead of covering Russian intervention, Channel One Russia's first news story was about Putin getting permission from Russian Parliament to *theoretically* use Russian forces in Ukraine *in the future* in case Russians living there 'continue' facing threats. RT's first news story was about the Head of Ukrainian Naval Forces pledging allegiance to 'Crimean people' (03:00:17, RT, 2 March 2014). Who was meant by 'Crimean people' was not specified but the officer pledged allegiance standing near Serhii Aksonov. The channels called Aksonov 'Prime Minister of Crimea' but did not explain that he was 'appointed' as such after Russian Special Operations Forces took control over Crimean Parliament. The channels let Aksonov call himself a head of the 'legitimate authorities' (03:03:48, RT, 2 March 2014) and claim that the situation in Crimea was under the control of *local self-defence groups*. The channels framed the need for self-defence groups in Crimea and in other places in Ukraine, especially in Ukraine's Southern and Eastern regions, by the threats allegedly coming from 'Nazis that came to power [in Kyiv]', the situation in Postmaidan Ukraine was said to be as bad as in Germany in 1933 (05:01-05:05, COR2, 2 March 2014). RT was slightly less outspoken in its comparisons but, in general, the expert invited by RT to comment the topic put the events happening in Ukraine into the similar context: 'axis of evil that is ranged against Russia that combines neo-conservatives in Washington and in Britain, and in France and elsewhere with radical neo-Nazis in Ukraine and radical Islamists in Chechnya' (03:14:39-03:14:50, RT, 2 March 2014). In contrast to the hostile portrayal of Ukrainian actors, Russia was framed as an innocent peace-maker: 'Russia has never attacked anyone. Since the times of Minin and Pozharsky, Russia has always won the wars and has defended Russia and peace-loving countries' (01:48-02:02, COR19, 2 March 2014).

### 13 April 2014

Both of the analysed channels made events happening in Ukraine the number one topic of their weekly news programmes broadcast on 13 April 2014. RT devoted more than 50% of the weekly news' airtime to the events in Ukraine, while on Channel One Russia, reporting about those events took almost 80% of the weekly news' airtime. Except for those events, Channel One Russia reported that Putin took part in the meeting of 'Folk's Front', (the main topic of the event was said to be the Russian authorities' fight against corruption), and that Putin prepared for 'Direct Line' – annual Q&A event with Russian President – as he wanted to get to know about the situation in a country from people, not from bureaucrats, is how the channel's anchorperson explained. The channel also did

an interview with the French politician Marine Le Pen criticising the EU for sanctions against Russia, as well as prepared the news story about the risks of obesity. As for RT, except for events happening in Ukraine, this channel covered protests in Rome motivated by Italy's 'stagnant economy', numerous protestors had flags with hammers and sickles on them (03:10:40, RT, 13 April 2014). RT also reported similar protests in Greece, told the story of a wounded Afghan girl who received treatment in the US and then was sent back to the war zone, and reported that western companies funded Formula One competitions in Bahrain despite Bahrain's regime being engaged in human rights violations.

While covering the situation in Ukraine, both of the analysed channels made events happening in Sloviansk their top news stories. However, none of the channels reported the central role played by Russian military commanders (first of all by Igor Girkin) in the capture of administrative buildings in Sloviansk or in the city of Kramatorsk. Instead, both of the channels tried to frame the events in these and other cities of the Southern and Eastern regions of Ukraine purely as the initiative of locals protesting and fighting against Kyiv authorities: 'we defend our motherland from the fascist army that is going to kill us' (03:05:15-03:05:19, RT, 13 April 2014), and devoted a noticeable part of the airtime to strengthen this framing: 'there is no single Russian officer or soldier from the Russian Federation, no single citizen of Russian Federation. There are exclusively citizens of Ukraine' (14:12-14:23, COR1, 13 April 2014). Therefore, it can be said that Channel One Russia and RT included the events in Sloviansk to the agenda of their weekly news programmes but framed them in a way silencing the origin of people behind those events. RT also reported the statements of Western politicians saying that 'Russian agents are behind the havoc that's being unfolding in Ukraine's East', adding that 'Russia must clear off South-Eastern Ukraine!' (03:07:42-03:07:47, RT, 13 April 2014). However, RT accompanied this statement with the following comment: 'the protesters are simply locals who are fed up and do not want to live in a country ruled by oligarchs and neo-Nazis. Claims that Russian agents are steering up unrest on the ground are absurd' (03:08:11-03:08:22, RT, 13 April 2014). In comparison to RT, Channel One Russia was less outspoken in criticising Russia. Still, in general, the framing of the origin of Sloviansk's events on both of the channels was similar.

Except for covering unrest in Sloviansk, the channels also reported anti-government protests in other Ukrainian cities, including in Donetsk, Kharkiv and Zaporizhzhia. The difference in channels' framing of those events is illustrated by the fact that while RT's journalist made a report from the headquarters of the then recently self-proclaimed 'Donetsk people's republic' ('DNR'), the journalists of Channel One Russia prepared a news story about features and advantages of a federal model of government as well as another news story with the address to



Ukrainians by Russia-based Viktor Yanukovych saying that Ukrainians wish to protect themselves from nationalists coming to power in Kyiv after Maidan; in that news story Yanukovych was called ‘the president of Ukraine’.

## **20 July 2014**

As in the three previously analysed weekly news programmes, the events happening in Ukraine were the number one topic covered by Channel One Russia and RT, the share of the airtime devoted to those events was slightly more than 75% on the former channel and slightly more than 70% on the latter. Except for the events happening in Ukraine, Channel One Russia made a detailed coverage of four other topics: the technical details of the crash in the Moscow metro and the heroic behaviour of workers of Russian emergency services helping people, Vladimir Putin visiting BRICS’s meeting happening on ‘the initial phase of the creation of “the non-American world”’ (02:13-02:20, COR6, 20 July 2014); the channel also reported the ‘bloody Sunday’ (00:04, COR10, 20 July 2014) – the beginning of an Israeli military operation in Gaza, as well as the tens of thousands in a religious procession in Russia; Putin reportedly took part in that religious event, the channel broadcast parts of his speech – those about love and about the unity of Russian lands, while the head of the Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill underlined that ‘there is no military threat coming from Russia as well as no other threats’ (04:08-04:14, COR11, 20 July 2014). Speaking of the agenda of RT, except for converging events in Ukraine, this channel reported the Israeli military operation in Gaza, for example, by including detailed video footage of a screaming Palestinian man who was said to have died because of Israeli fire while looking for his family.

Despite some attention to other above-described topics, the downing of Flight MH-17 was the first and the most closely covered topic in the weekly news programmes of Channel One Russia and RT. The channels prepared several news stories about the tragedy: both of the channels positively portrayed the self-proclaimed ‘Donetsk people’s republic’ based on the claims that it no longer limited access of the international experts to the crash site, both channels framed the tragedy as an unclear and complicated event and blamed Ukrainian and Western politicians for assigning the responsibility to Russia and Russia-backed forces: ‘before investigators made it to the crash site, the US announced to the world where the deadly missile shot came from’ (03:12:53-03:13:01, RT, 20 July 2014). The focus on the unclarity of the event was more noticeable on RT. As for Channel One Russia, on the one hand, it broadcast appeals to restrain from any kinds of accusations, and, on the other hand, offered channel’s viewers various versions of how exactly Ukraine shot down the plane: ‘they [Ukrainians] did not correctly identify whose plane it was . . . they reported to the president

[Poroshenko] that the plane is going towards Russia and, who knows, it might be an intelligence (razvedyvatelnyi) aircraft. He, as a chief commander gave the order to shoot down the plane. It is a certain version' (11:46-11:58, COR2, 20 July 2014). Vladimir Putin's stance about the downing of MH-17 was reported by both of the channels, both portraying the Russian president positively for offering his condolences and for, as channels framed it, his readiness to help with the investigation: 'President Putin has declared the need for a thorough and impartial investigation, to which Russia will assist in every possible way' (00:00-00:06, COR3, 20 July 2014). Both of the channels also prepared news stories about the victims of the crash. Journalists of RT even went to the Netherlands to talk to friends and neighbours of some of the victims. Importantly, Channel One Russia's news story about the victims of the crash was finished by the fragment comparing the number of casualties due to the crash with the number of local civilians killed during the reported week, the latter number was said to be significantly higher.

Except for covering the crash, both of the channels reported the shelling of the Luhansk region. The shelling was framed in a way that the channels unequivocally assigned the responsibility for it and for killing civilians to Ukraine. Moreover, the crash of Flight MH-17 was put into the broader context of the violent conflict in Donbas, for example, Channel One Russia framed the tragedy as the provocation by Ukrainian authorities aimed at discrediting the self-proclaimed republics. It was said that after such a provocation Ukraine 'can continue conducting punitive operation [in Donbas] ignoring the laws of war and the accusations of demolishing its own people' (02:18-02:24, COR2, 20 July 2014). The analysed weekly news programmes did not include any reports about the involvement of Russians in the tragedy, including the involvement of Igor Girkin – the FSB officer and the then 'Defence Minister' of the self-proclaimed 'DNR', the information about his involvement was available in the very first days after the crash and was later confirmed by international investigators.<sup>6 7</sup>

### **Conclusion: Regime-friendly construction of enemies**

The media agenda of Channel One Russia and framing of events happening in Ukraine by this channel were more or less similar to those by RT. In contrast, when not covering news from Ukraine, the two channels focused on very different events happening in Russia and/or elsewhere. As can be seen from the general agenda of the eight analysed weekly news programmes, Channel One Russia's non-

6 van Huis, P. (2020): The MH17 Trial Part 1: New Material from the Four Defendants. Bellingcat.

7 Bellingcat Investigation Team (2022): Donbas Doubles: The Search for Girkin and Plotnitsky's Cover Identities.

Ukraine-related news was mostly positive reports about Russian authorities caring about medicine, education, sport, moral, etc. Importantly, Vladimir Putin was repeatedly said to have the leading role in the reported positive developments in those and other spheres of life. RT's non-Ukraine-related news stories were of a different nature: they were mostly about anti-government protests, violence, sufferings, human rights violations, deaths, killings, etc; many of those undesirable events and processes were said to happen because of 'the West', especially the US. In other words, Channel One Russia and RT put the same events happening in Ukraine into very different media agendas. The former channel made events happening in Ukraine serve as a contrast to the positive Russian agenda. In its turn, RT made events happening in Ukraine appear as just another illustration of violent international agenda. Such differences in approaches applied by Channel One Russia (Russian TV channel predominately broadcasting for an internal audience), and RT (Russia's international broadcaster) lay in line with earlier studies of state-controlled mass communication of autocracies showing that when communicating with its citizens, autocracies tend to combine negative information about the regime's enemies with positive information about the regime itself and its leaders, while the international mass communication of autocracies does not necessarily include a noticeably positive portrayal of the regime and its leaders (Dukalskis 2017; Dukalskis & Patane 2019; Nino et al. 2021).

As for the channels' coverage of the events happening in Ukraine, the news stories about those events were the predominant part of the analysed coverage (timewise) in three out of four analysed weeks. It shows the channels' close attention to the situation in Ukraine and implies the channels' wish to position those events as the topic of extreme priority for their audiences (Wanta, Golan & Lee 2004). As the reported events happening in Ukraine were those about clashes, protests, violence, threats, etc, the negativity of those events had the potential to attract additional attention of viewers to the analysed weekly news programmes and serve as a suitable general frame for the construction of crisis (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998).

Importantly, the only analysed week when the events happening in Ukraine were not the predominant part of the analysed weekly news programme was the week during the Euromaidan protests. This is rather unexpected given the repeated references to the events of the Euromaidan by Russian authorities, including the Russian president Putin. Those events are still kept in the Russian public agenda almost a decade after they happened but they were not the predominant part of the media agenda on Russian state-controlled TV channels as they were unfolding.

The analysis showed that two out of the four events that were planned to be in focus of the analysis were not covered by Channel One Russia and RT. It

comes about the first killings of Euromaidan protesters in the centre of Kyiv and the taking the Ukrainian Crimean Peninsula under 'effective control' by Russian forces. In other words, the channels silenced events that might have shed the negative light on Russia and/or its allies (e.g. pro-Russian Ukrainian authorities of the Euromaidan period) and proved the Russian invasion of Crimea several weeks before the so-called referendum in Crimea.

As mentioned in the theoretical part of the article, agenda-setting cannot be fully-objective, still, the decision to completely silence the killings of protesters shot dead in the centre of Kyiv and, simultaneously, to position the interviews with three wounded policemen as a top story has features of the attempt to mislead the audience and to distort its perception of the covered events (Ramsey & Robertshaw 2019). The channels' agenda-setting approach applied for the programmes broadcast on 2 March 2014 and 13 April 2014 is questionable as well. For example, it is rather unexpected to see the channels reporting that the Russian Parliament gave Vladimir Putin the permission to use Russian forces in Ukraine somewhen in the future, and ignoring the fact that Russian forces had taken 'effective control' over the Crimean Peninsula, including seizure of Crimean Parliament. Both the events in Crimea and in Sloviansk were framed by the channels as events of purely local origin – as those happening without any influence from Russia and motivated by the locals' fear of the Postmaidan 'Nazi' Ukrainian authorities. Therefore, the channels' agenda-setting was strengthening (if not enabling) the construction of enemies out of Ukrainian actors in the situation when Russian actions in Ukraine qualified for violation of international law (Cwicinskaja 2017).

Moreover, in both of those cases, Ukrainian actors were framed as Nazis threatening Russians, Russian-speaking people, as well as people residing in the Eastern and South-Eastern regions of Ukraine in general. As mentioned in the introduction of the article, the similar Nazi-frame is still used by the Russian regime to justify its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Historical recollections of the WWII period and the frequent comparison of Ukrainian actors to fascists and Nazis are known features of Russian state-controlled communication about events happening in Ukraine (Gaufman 2017; Edele 2017). The article complements the findings of the previous research and shows that back in 2014 calling Ukrainian actors 'Nazis' was not just one of many accusations against them but a general frame used by both of the analysed channels to report about events happening in Ukraine. In particular, the 'local' (as channels call them) uprisings against the Postmaidan Ukrainian government in Crimea and in the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv regions of Ukraine were said to be motivated by Nazi leanings of Ukrainian authorities threatening well-being and even survival of those who do not support them.

The *Nazi frame* – the main ‘problem definition’ (Entman 1993) applied by the channels to report about the analysed events happening in Ukraine in 2014 – was developing over time: in the weekly news programmes broadcast on 26 January 2014, both of the channels mentioned that there are (neo-)Nazis among ‘radical’ and ‘aggressive’ Euromaidan protesters; on 2 March 2014, both of the channels reported that Nazis had come to power and were threatening ‘Crimean people’; on 13 April 2014 both Channel One Russia and RT reported that Kyiv was about to begin a military crackdown against ‘locals’, while the ‘locals’ said that they were ready to die defending themselves from the Nazi army coming to kill them; on 20 July 2014, Channel One Russia relied on its reporting of previous months to frame the crash of the Malaysia Airlines Flight MH-17 as a provocation organised by Ukrainian authorities, the channels also strengthened previous frames by reporting that Ukrainian authorities did this provocation because they were keen to further ‘demolish its own people’ [in Donbas].

After the prolonged state-controlled construction of a Ukrainian Nazi-enemy on Russian TV, it is a challenging task to look back and to say whether another frame would have been so successful in turning the attitude of Russians towards Ukraine from predominately positive to predominately negative within a year – from January 2014 to January 2015 (Levada Center 2015). The further possible outcomes of media framing – causal interpretation and moral evaluation – offered by the channels to their viewers also heavily relied on portraying Post-maidan Ukrainian Authorities as Nazis killing ‘its own people’. Therefore, the whole Russian years-long TV framing of events happening in Ukraine would collapse in the absence of a Nazi frame; in such a situation, the remaining element of a frame – the treatment recommendation chosen by the Russian regime and explained by the alleged need to denazify Ukraine in a ‘special military operation’ would also be hardly seen as reliable. However, the Nazi frame was not challenged, especially for the audience of Channel One Russia, because most viewers of this channel live in the state-controlled media environment, where all the *major* media outlets transmit the framing of political reality fruitful for the autocratic regime (Becker 2014).

The analysis has shown that in some aspects, the agenda-setting and framing applied by RT appeared more balanced compared to those by Channel One Russia. For example, unlike the latter channel, RT mentioned that both the protesters *and* police were using violence during the Euromaidan. Additionally, RT included statements of Western politicians saying that Russian agents were behind the events in Sloviansk in its news stories (however, later those statements were framed as unreliable), and did not directly blame Ukraine for the crash of Flight MH-17; instead, this channel’s crash-related agenda was organised around the appeal for a thorough investigation and for abstaining from assigning re-

sponsibility before the investigation was completed. In other words, being the Russian state-controlled channel broadcasting for viewers living in pluralistic media environments, RT adjusted its agenda and made it appear more reliable in the eyes of a European audience that is likely aware of some of the negative information about Russia and its allies. Still, as a whole, RT's Ukraine-related agenda-setting and framing were very similar to those of Channel One Russia. With the help of state-controlled agenda-setting and framing, both of the channels contributed to the construction of crises, threats and enemies in the context of the Euromaidan, the Annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas.

To sum up the paper, the analysis has shown that as early as in 2014, the state-controlled construction of a 'Ukrainian Nazi enemy' heavily relied on a pro-regime strategy of setting the media agenda and media frames. The empirical part of the article is based on the relatively small amount of data analysed by means of a qualitative method (which somewhat limited the ability to generalise the conclusions). Still, the available findings allow stating that in the conditions of a state-controlled information environment, the regime-friendly media agenda and frames are exactly the tools capable of constructing enemies. Therefore, there is the need for further empirical research of agenda-setting and framing applied by authoritarian countries in the processes of constructing enemies – the stage that might be the preparation for regimes' calls to fight those enemies.

The Ukrainian 'Nazi' enemy constructed by Russian state-controlled TV back in 2014 is currently being fought by hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers taking part in the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian War, while in its column for Russian state-controlled online outlet RIA Novosti, published in April 2022, Sergeyev offered a new development of the Nazi frame by arguing that not just Ukrainian authorities but most Ukrainian civilians are Nazis and should be 'denazified', while the methods Russia is undertaking for its war against Ukrainians potentially correspond to the criteria of genocide as listed in Article II of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (United Nations 1948). Currently, international institutions (for example, European Parliament) are considering different options for conducting an international tribunal aimed at holding Russia accountable for its 'crime of aggression against Ukraine' (European Parliament 2023).



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**Annex. Links to the analysed weekly news programmes**

Date	Link to the analysed weekly news programme of Channel One Russia	Link to the analysed weekly news programme of RT
26 January 2014	<a href="https://www.itv.ru/news/issue/2014-01-26/21:00">https://www.itv.ru/news/issue/2014-01-26/21:00</a>	<a href="https://archive.org/details/RT_20140126_200000">https://archive.org/details/RT_20140126_200000</a>
2 March 2014	<a href="https://www.itv.ru/news/issue/2014-03-02/21:00">https://www.itv.ru/news/issue/2014-03-02/21:00</a>	<a href="https://archive.org/details/RT_20140302_180000_Interviews_Culture_Art_Documentaries_and_Sports">https://archive.org/details/RT_20140302_180000_Interviews_Culture_Art_Documentaries_and_Sports</a>
13 April 2014	<a href="https://www.itv.ru/news/issue/2014-04-13/21:00">https://www.itv.ru/news/issue/2014-04-13/21:00</a>	<a href="https://archive.org/details/RT_20140413_180000_Interviews_Culture_Art_Documentaries_and_Sports/start/4080/end/4140">https://archive.org/details/RT_20140413_180000_Interviews_Culture_Art_Documentaries_and_Sports/start/4080/end/4140</a>
20 July 2014	<a href="https://www.itv.ru/news/issue/2014-07-20/21:00">https://www.itv.ru/news/issue/2014-07-20/21:00</a>	<a href="https://archive.org/details/RT_20140720_190000_Headline_News/start/1200/end/1260">https://archive.org/details/RT_20140720_190000_Headline_News/start/1200/end/1260</a>

Source: The author