

# The Russian Media Coverage of the ‘Ukrainian Issue’: the Priorities of Informing

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## Abstract

The current political crisis in Ukraine has become markedly visualized not only due to the very contradictory situation in this country but also following its coverage in the Russian media. The situation initiated new information tendencies which seem to be illustrative for understanding not only the relationship between Russia and Ukraine, but also the development of the media sphere and its role in the contemporary Russian politics. This article envisages the reasons of why the Russian media look fully dependent on the political hierarchy in this country. Following this, journalism in Russia seems to be fading and giving way to propaganda which has nothing in common with media non-partisanship. Following this, the media coverage of the events in South-Eastern Ukraine explicitly shows that this information gravitates to a simplified understanding of the conflict and stimulates the existence of stereotypes and myths as being a background for media manipulation. The coverage of the Ukrainian situation is being reflected in the presence of manipulative tools in the media as a mechanism of controlling people’s mindsets which is detrimental for Russian society and the media themselves.

**Keywords:** mass media, mass information journalism, propaganda, Russian politics, political crisis in Ukraine

## 1. Introduction

The armed conflict in the South-Eastern Ukraine has been ongoing for a year. It continues between the forces of the Ukrainian national army and different associate forces on the one hand, and the detachments from the unrecognized Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics. Although some time ago the Russian President Putin and his Ukrainian counterpart Poroshenko in the presence of the leaders of Germany and France concluded in Minsk the quadripartite agreement on a ceasefire in the conflict territory, the situation there remains tense. The Russian media regularly report on numerous actions in the zone of military activity, the death of civil people including Russian journalists, and the actions that are being pursued by defenders of Russian-speaking population in Ukraine. However, the Kremlin still officially refuses to acknowledge not only the presence in Ukraine of the Russian army but even the supply of weaponry there, and consequently does not admit that the conflict is an open military confrontation between the two countries.

In addition to the harsh debates continuing for a long time about how to define the essence of this conflict and who is to blame for its outbreak, the situation in the South-Eastern Ukraine revealed, at least, two paradoxical circumstances. Firstly, despite the months-long bloodshed and numerous victims, the rating of the Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to be unusually high. According to the survey of the Levada center held in November 2014, in the midst of hostilities, 82 % of the respondents expressed support for Putin. True, his ranking fell by five points compared to a month before. In the meantime, 53 % of respondents would vote for Vladimir Putin, if elections were held in the near Sunday.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, most Russians still continue to believe that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine benefits to the political reputation of the former and contributes to improving its international prestige. It was confirmed during one more survey conducted in November 2014 by the Levada center too. 64 % of respondents (of 1,600 people from 46 Russian regions) admitted that the Russian media objectively value the situation in Ukraine; 46% of those being questioned stated that the South-Eastern regions of Ukraine were historically a part and parcel of Russia, and therefore

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<sup>1</sup> Kalinina, N. (2014) Ljudi ustali ot vojni na Ukraine i padeniya rublya [People are tired of the war in Ukraine and falling of the ruble], 1 Dec. 2014, <http://ura.ru/content/primenews/01-12-2014/news/1052195680.html>, accessed 19.01.2015.

must belong to Russia.<sup>2</sup> Thus, most Russians still consider the annexation of the Crimea, held in March 2014, and support by their country of the South-Eastern Ukraine as a confirmation of Russia's great power, which has been undermined in recent years.

The answer to the question of why public opinion in Russia fully supports the military confrontation in Ukraine, concerns, to a large extent, the information policy suggested by the Russian media. On the example of this conflict, perhaps, everyone begins to understand how the role of mass information is serious. Throughout most of 2014 the federal media sources promoted the specific news coverage which was leaving no doubts about their political intentions. To be more certain, instead of covering the contradictions as being inevitable for any conflict, the Russian media suggest a one-sided interpretation of the reality. This approach promotes propaganda priorities with specific forms of persuasion.

Based on the theory of propaganda and its evolution in the Russian information sphere, this article aims to analyze information techniques through which the modern Russian media change the daily perceptions of the audience about the situation in Ukraine. In order to achieve this, the author intends to highlight the fundamental differences between journalism and propaganda as affecting the content of the mass media; to consider information priorities in the coverage of international politics of Russia, to see how political reality is being reflected in contemporary Russian media. The main focus is concentrated on the investigation of pivotal trends on Russian television concerning the current situation in Ukraine.

## **2. Journalism vs. Propaganda: towards the Theoretical Frameworks of These Definitions**

In order to identify the information problem with regard to the coverage of the situation in Ukraine, it is necessary to identify the differences between journalism and propaganda which would clarify the nature of the information circulating nowadays in the Russian media. For many media practitioners in Russia these differences have never been the case for reflection, although most of them remember the definition of journalism as a public activity on collection, processing, arrangement and dissemination of social information through the media (Prokhorov, 2000). Meanwhile, this definition does not distinguish the professional standards of journalism compared to propaganda. The latter is also involved in the promotion of socially oriented information.

The purposes of journalism and propaganda are totally different due to their different objections in the world. The main mission of journalism is to give the audience balanced and holistic views on everyday environment absorbed with numerous problems and contradictions. A move to objectivity, in turn, is based on civic liability and certain ethical standards. Unlike propaganda shaping a positive image of an actor due to the promotion of his/its corporate (political economic or any other) interests, journalism primarily cares about 'searching for truth', and therefore rejects initially biased author's position (Prokhorov, 2000). Consequently, information cannot be called journalism if it is dominated by one-sided perception. Thereby, the discursive approach based on using views and opinions of different actors is a significant trait of journalism. Propaganda, in turn, never seeks opposite views and opinions and always seems to 'prove truth' by cutting 'unnecessary' facts from the context.

Simultaneously, the idea of journalistic objectivity has always been questionable for media experts due to a great number of obstacles to its implementation. Media founders and owners as well as the media audience have a constant impact on the position of a creator of information. Thus, journalistic objectivity always looks somehow idealistic (Hemanus, 1976; Westerstahl, 1983; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986; Ryan, 2001). As early as the 1920s, Walter Lippmann fairly noted that facts as an integral part of journalistic work immediately become different to its origins due to their subjective interpretations. In the meantime, the society is unable to develop more effective ways of self-perception than using journalism penetrating into the very depth of society (Lippmann, 1922).

Journalism accumulates the interests of citizens and tends to satisfy their views and needs about their own community. According to Habermas (1962), this enables society to reduce, partly at least, conflicts within it. As for propaganda, it is motivated by certain political demands. In this regard, if journalism is mostly determined by social interests of the mass audience, then propaganda is generated by political, social, spiritual and other needs of the actors (both collective and individual), which publicly declare their wishes (Pratkanis & Aronson, 2000, Patrick, 2012, Jowett & O'Donnel, 2012).

As a result, propaganda seems to be based on the idea of the authoritarian or even totalitarian type of management where comprehensive control is strict because this technique suggests 'a massive orchestration of attractive conclusions packaged to conceal both their persuasive purpose and lack of sound supporting reasons' (Sproule, 1994). In a civic

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<sup>2</sup> Rossyiskaya politika v otnoshenii Krimea [The Russian politics towards the Crimea], Dec. 10, 2014, <http://www.levada.ru/10-12-2014/rossiiskaya-politika-v-otnoshenii-kryma>, accessed 19.01.2015.

society with the existence of different public institutions involved in controlling the political sphere such information looks less visible (McQuail, 1992). In the meantime, it does not mean that propaganda cannot circulate in these conditions. Since the McQuail's analysis more than 20 years passed, and nowadays propaganda is successfully conveyed by would-be democratic governments seeking enemies who threaten 'good' people. The media coverage of recent national and international conflicts taking place in Libya, Syria, Iraq and other countries seems to be a good illustration of this. The inversion of reality is so pervasive today that 'normal' information seems to be purely suppressed.<sup>3</sup>

Journalism distributes information aimed at public, rather than narrow interests. In this regard, the actor perceives journalism as a field of creative activity while propaganda becomes attributed to technologies, i.e. a set of information techniques initiated more frequently by the state. When technologies are introduced, the manipulative influence becomes vivid. According to Kovaleva (2001), creativity and technology always oppose each other albeit not very clearly. Nonetheless, journalism cannot completely reject technological approaches. Without them it is unlikely to talk about the creation of any information. Yet, it is impossible to consider that propaganda entirely denies creativity. In the meantime, propaganda is an option of stricter intentions than journalism, which is less instructive. Propaganda, in turn, seems to be more rigid about persuading the audience in certain principles that are proclaimed. The more hierarchical the will is the more information seems to be devoid of discursiveness.

At the same time propaganda is influenced by political reality emerging as a result of long evolution of society. Consequently, in order to understand the principles of media propaganda, it is worth looking at the political priorities developed in the country. Unlike journalism, which provides the audience with selection of ideas and personal positions of contributors, propaganda affects the masses straightforwardly and insists on what to think. As Jowett and O'Donnell (2006, p. 5) fairly note, propaganda profits from the masses but exploits their needs for its self-affirmation. It is certain that in some respects propaganda seems to be misleading and can be entirely untrue (McQuail, 2007). In the meantime, propaganda can be carried out not only in direct, but also in milder forms, such as education, inspiration and sensual perceptions which involve individuals into culture and history. However, regardless of how exactly propaganda functions, its certain ideas and values seem to deeply penetrate into mass consciousness and provide unified perceptions (Strovsky, 2001: 164-165).

Summing up, propaganda, one way or another, subdues people and makes them unable to think independently from the state and its institutions. The effectiveness of propaganda is expressed in forming a unified public opinion about the facts and problems. This creates a specific emotional atmosphere that affects the behavior of society.

### **3. Propaganda in Russia: Historical Origins**

The media coverage of any situation is defined not only by modern political priorities existing in a country but also by historical evolution of that society. The investigation of this evolution with the example of Russia makes it understandable why propaganda, but not journalism, has become a part of the contemporary political agenda.

To begin with, the Russian media traditionally existed as a part of the state system and the instruments of the authorities. The tradition of subordination of the Russian press to the state dates back to 1702 when the first print newspaper *Vedomosti* appeared by the initiative of the Russian Emperor Peter the Great. It was him who edited this publication until his death in 1725. Since then, the tradition of the existence of the state press has been consistently developed in Russia. This press became the most important element within the Russian media system and simultaneously turned out to be the guardian of the tsarist politics as such (Kovaleva, 1996). If the media in all Western European and Scandinavian countries developed as private enterprises, which was their formal basis of independence from the state, the Russian press was financially and therefore contextually controlled by the monarchy. This created specific conditions for the development of the Russian information process.

A lack of media plurality in Russia was a prerequisite of journalism, which made it impossible for the press to oppose political constraints. If the media process in Europe, albeit with difficulties, from the very beginning gravitated to journalism, on the basis of the above plurality, the same possibilities in Russia were severely limited. According to Posner, the Russian media could not develop as a 'fourth-rate estate' due, at least, to their existence as part and parcel of the state mechanism.<sup>4</sup> The mission of the Russian press before 1917 was, to some extent, to be servile to the Russian

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<sup>3</sup> Pilger, J, War by media and the triumph of propaganda, 5 Dec., 2014, <http://johnpilger.com/articles/war-by-media-and-the-triumph-of-propaganda>, accessed 06.02.2015.

<sup>4</sup> Pozner, V. (2013) *Otkritaya leksiya o zhurnalistike* [The open lecture about journalism], 27 May 2013, [http://ria.ru/tv\\_society/20130525/938641142.html](http://ria.ru/tv_society/20130525/938641142.html), accessed 23.03.2014.

state. There were some things which could be criticized by journalists but all of them never discussed the saint of the saint: inviolability of the Monarchy. The media dependence on the Monarchy was noticeable from their contents.

The Soviet period has become even more crucial in this respect. The one-party system proclaimed by the Bolsheviks immediately after taking over the power, have been imprinted on the media. Mass information has become the powerful voice of the Communist Party. This situation enhanced censorship which made propaganda a pivotal tool in safeguarding state interests. Even the entertaining information could not be at odds with existing political interests. The coverage of international politics also had to be built on ideological priorities of the powers and absorbed with the idea of permanent confrontation between the Soviet Union and the West. This confrontation was a meaningful feature of the Soviet media for many decades.

The Soviet propaganda in the 1920-1930s enthusiastically described a 'hostile face' of capitalism. News-items and reports about American and Western realities were constantly constructed on the principle of 'the worse the better'. Numerous cartoons which appeared in Pravda and the other Soviet outlets depicted foreign political leaders as monsters with big stomachs, malicious and sly faces.

In terms of promoting Soviet politics after World War II the mass media developed similar ideas. The core principle being a backbone of the Soviet ideology was to scare political enemies, to destroy them morally and to compel them surrender. Although the same principles concern all ideologies acting against each other, there was the difference between Soviets and the West. Having announced an official doctrine, the Soviets were eager to physically destroy an opposition within the country, and propaganda was a powerful weapon in this confrontation. Propaganda was also used in Western countries in the fight against the Soviet Union but no one there was punished, at least in theory, for objecting to official dogma (Chilton, 1982).

The 'enemy image' embedded in the Soviet media gave birth to a simplified journalistic description of 'alien' activity. It was an 'artificially moralistic version, [...] a product of deliberate brainwashing and manipulation' (Melville, 1988). Such phrases as 'aggressive imperialism' and 'predatory society towards people' were commonly used in the Soviet media during the period of the Cold War that lasted until the late 1980s. It gradually shaped a certain understanding of 'oppressive' realities in the Western countries.

Determining the specifics of information promoted in the Soviet Union between the media and the mass audience, it is worth saying about a certain communication phenomenon being developed there. The special linguistic structure of the media language, based on both images and symbols, has been worked out. The point, however, was not only about pictures and cartoons which were regularly published in the press. The Soviet media preferred to intimidate the public by telling about foreign threats and simultaneously about the 'peaceful' priorities of the Soviet Union which does not wish to harm the West. The Soviet propaganda machine did not notice that these assertions looked, at least, contradictory and streamlined.

The level of the media coverage in the Soviet Union did not provide a thoughtful journalistic estimation of international events. The existing military-oriented ideology contributed to primitive vocabulary stamps. Therefore, those scholars who consider journalists as mostly generalists promoting the political agenda from the high-rank authorities seem to be true. According to Dorman and Farhang (1987), an assumption that a journalist can be an expert is a 'myth [rather] than an established fact'. Therefore, Soviet journalists writing about international topics drew their own conclusions based on allowed trends. As a result, the overwhelming majority of material covering international conflicts was quite superficial, or trivial. Thereby, the media provoked social détente and fueled different conflicts in international affairs.

A very similar process occurred in the 1990s, although the then political conditions of the media existence in Russia seem to have become been totally different. The Russian President Boris Yeltsin did not have a detailed international strategy, particularly with reference to the media, and the previous ideological antagonists like the US and Western European countries suddenly turned out to be friends. Meanwhile, the media position towards many international issues was still very chaotic, inconsistent and dependent on the instructions from the Kremlin. Taking into account the historical background and changes that took place in the period of transformation from the Soviet to Russian statehood, the situation has not become different.

The Russian media seem to have been liberated from the state patronage, which it was for many previous decades. However, the surveillance over the information content from the political hierarchy has taken different forms but hasn't changed entirely. The powers showed a clear need for censorship despite numerous assurances by Yeltsin himself about Russia's commitment to freedom and democracy. At the same time, there existed a great number of attempts initiated by the Kremlin to restore preliminary censorship which was allegedly cancelled by the Russian Media Law of 1991 (Doklad, 1997).

The Russian authorities were actively involved in the media activities. Vigorous actions in the mid 1990-s have been

taken by Anatoly Chubais, the head of the Presidential Administration, who was eager to censor the media. Chubais regularly instructed the editors of leading Russian outlets about how to cover 'correctly' the most important issues of the day including international politics. On behalf of the Presidential Administration and the Russian government, he was trying to let them know what information had to be published and what is not. In terms of financial problems for most media these 'advices' were treated by the editors as tough instructions for action (Reddaway & Glinski, 2001).

The above example clearly confirms that during the Yeltsin's presidency the relationship between the government and the media were still built on familiar administrative regulation, used as early as in the Soviet times. Although the media themselves, including most television channels, have ceased to be a part of the state property, the powerful influence of the state still affected journalistic work and developed propaganda activity. The media information, as before, was adjusted to narrow political interests conflicting with the interests of society. Thereby, the problem of media objectivity was still unresolved. This clearly proved that the historical tradition of propaganda influence was very tenacious in the changing conditions of the Russian media existence.

#### 4. The Russian Media under President Putin: Going Where?

Since 2000, during Putin's three tenures in power, the situation with media partizanship has turned out to be even worse. Respectively, the level of media propaganda has increased. The both trends can be confirmed. For instance, during the last decade the Russian media have been consistently treated by international media organizations as being not free. One of them, Reporters without Borders, has ranked Russia in 2004 on the 140th place among 167 countries with regard to press freedom. Russia, to be exact, was followed by Sudan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which makes impossible to perceive it as the state with free dissemination of information.<sup>5</sup> Over the next few years the 'standard of freedoms' in Russia remained virtually unchanged, with a few items fluctuations. For example, in the memorandum of the Reporters without Borders published in May 2010, Russia was mentioned among the forty states (along with Belarus, Libya, Cuba, Iran and others), where press freedom is being actively suppressed. The Russian President Putin was named as a 'plunderer of the free press'.<sup>6</sup> In 2012 a well-known human rights organization Freedom House, funded by the US government has put Russia on 172nd place among the countries being evaluated regarding freedom of speech.<sup>7</sup> A year later Freedom House named Russia among authoritarian regimes being actively suppressive to freedom of word together with China and Iran.<sup>8</sup>

Many experts (Oates, 2001; Belin, 2004; Simons & Strovsky, 2006; Mathews & Nemsova, 2006; Beumers at al, 2009; Simons, 2010; Nordenstreng & Pietilainen, 2010; Strovsky, 2012; Vartanova, 2012, 2013) also agree that the main reason for the situation escalated during the last years has been affected by the Russian authorities undermining the media and enhancing political vertical currently promoted by the Presidential office. The Kremlin, claims Mickiewicz (2008) directly affects mass information during election campaigns, which makes both the election process and the media as a decorative tool of contemporary Russian politics.

Yet, the last ten years of Russian politics have been marked by new tendencies compared with the 1990s. The Kremlin activities have consequently brought transformation of the national political system. In accordance with the President's decree signed in 2000, the Russian map was marked by the appearance of seven (nowadays eight) federal okrugs which tightened the vertical of state management. The electoral system was renewed with electing deputies of different levels only on party lists. The election of governors, in turn, has been replaced by their appointment from the Kremlin. All this made the authorities fully accountable to the President, but not to Russian society.

Putin and his administration have not only strengthened control in all spheres, including the media, but seriously limited discursiveness on the most pivotal issues. However, having tired of political and economic failures of the 1990s, Russian society adopted this 'formula of successes' and rejected the idea of media freedom shaped during the years of

<sup>5</sup> Reporters without Borders, [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%E5%EF%EE%F0%F2%B8%F0%FB\\_%E1%E5%E7\\_%E3%F0%E0%ED%E8%F6](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%E5%EF%EE%F0%F2%B8%F0%FB_%E1%E5%E7_%E3%F0%E0%ED%E8%F6), accessed 04.02.2015.

<sup>6</sup> Reporters without Borders, [http://wikipedia.sfstate.us/wiki/Reporters\\_Without\\_Borders](http://wikipedia.sfstate.us/wiki/Reporters_Without_Borders), accessed 02.02.2015.

<sup>7</sup> Svoboda SMI v Rossii [Freedom of the mass media in Russia], <http://bruyaka.ru/novosti/svoboda-smi-v-rossii>, accessed 27.04.2014.

<sup>8</sup> Rating svobodi slova v stranakh mira 2013 goda [Rating of freedom of word in the countries of the world in 2013], 2 May 2013, <http://www.liveinternet.ru/tags/%F0%E5%EF%EE%F0%F2%E5%F0%FB+%E1%E5%E7+%E3%F0%E0%ED%E8%F6/>, accessed 27.04.2014.

Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost and Boris Yeltsin's market reforms. Gorbachev and Yeltsin themselves were severely criticized by the media which time by time made them crossed about media reflections. Gorbachev one day was even prone to forbid the Soviet Media Law of 1990 as being, in his view, 'insufficiently adequate' to the then political situation in the country. However, despite their frequent disagreements with the media critics, both leaders never resorted to taking retaliatory measures against journalists. With the advent of Putin, the situation has become fundamentally different. Negative media assessments regarding high-rank authorities have virtually disappeared or become more moderate. The authorities, in turn, began to prevent the dissemination of information compromising the existing political system. Moreover, similarly to the Soviet time, the powers at different levels began to use administrative forms of influencing the media. Old methods became promoted anew and included not only a 'telephone right' enabling apparatchiks to suppress journalists by correspondence, but also numeral bans on receiving information (which contradicts the current legislation in the Russian media sphere).

Under these circumstances possibilities of the journalistic profession became seriously pressured. Currently, everyone who investigates information trends in contemporary Russia recognizes a loss of non-partisanship and objectivity in most media.

This puts on the agenda the question about tough limits of journalistic freedoms in this country. Numerous cases of direct pressure on the Russian mass media from high-ranking officials have become habitual. This truly outrageous situation for the country has been recognized even by Dmitry Medvedev at the time of his Presidency.<sup>9</sup> In considering this situation, Simons fairly notes that the Russian government mostly uses the media as its propaganda instrument for the protection of the Russian foreign and domestic politics. As a consequence, public trust towards political information has been steadily declining following most of circulations of the print media (Simons, 2010).

There are certain reasons to believe that Russia is currently completing the development of the specific media system. On the one hand, it still promotes media trends which have always been traditional for Russian society. For instance, the overwhelming majority of print outlets (about 75 per cent of the whole number in Russia) are controlled by the authorities, similarly to the historical tradition that started from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and continued under the Soviets. Although the Russian Media Law of 1991 seems to proclaim equal rights for all types of the media, it is pretty far from being realised. On the other hand, the existing media system offers new algorithms of professional functioning. The Russian media seem to be as an instrument of 'settling accounts' between different political groups, business clans, etc. rather than the sources of verified information (Becker, 2004).

To be objective, media dependence on the political powers is a worldwide phenomenon. Media are always involved into the system of social and political relations, and therefore the main information trends seem, one way or another, to be unalienable from investigating politics. However, in Russia an overwhelming number of media are unable to criticize not only Russian President and Prime-Minister but even regional governors. At the same time, media seem to be far from consuming the whole spectrum of opinions on political issues.

A lack of free public discussions raises an issue about the old tradition of media dependence on the Russian powers and, consequently, inability of the media themselves to promote their own views and analysis about harsh situations for Russia. It fully concerned the tragedy with the submarine 'Kursk' in 2000, the hostage taking in the Moscow Theatre on Dubrovka and at the school in Beslan in 2002 and 2004, the explosions of houses in Moscow and Volgograd that occurred in the mid-2000s, the wreck of the ship 'Bulgaria' in the Kuibyshev reservoir and the flooding of the city of Krymsk in the Krasnodar region in 2011, etc. The secrecy of information and one-sided interpretation of facts during the coverage of these situations, clearly illustrates the 'make up' of information in modern Russia. This enables to better understand the level of informing demonstrated by the Russian media during the current political conflict in Ukraine.

##### **5. Media Coverage of the 'Ukrainian Issue' as a Reflection of the Russian Spiritual Tradition**

The Russian media coverage of the political situation in Ukraine is dominated by a lack of objectivity. On the one hand, this approach illustrates the historical origins of the information process, with its one-sided performance of the political agenda. On the other hand, such coverage has inherited the standard of information implemented under Putin.

A good example illustrating this situation from the very outset was and still is the Russian media position towards the US and EU countries. The annexation of the Crimea as a part of Ukraine by Russia in March 2014 has led to the implementation of mutual political and economic sanctions between Russia and Western countries. The Russian media immediately lashed out with blatant criticism on the leaders of these states who allegedly provoked the international

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<sup>9</sup> Dmitry Medvedev priznal davlenie na rossiyskie SMI [Dmitry Medvedev admitted pressure on the Russian media], 26 January 2012, <http://busilon.com/materialy/novosti/politika/dmitrii-medvedev-priznal-davlenie-na-rosiiskie-smi.html>, accessed 02.02.2015.

situation. Almost all Russian media have been encouraged by the Kremlin's decision to keep up the Crimea as a 'legitimate part of Russia' following the results of the war with the Turks in 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Russian media 'forgot' that the annexation of the Crimea in 2014 contravened the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, which defined the inviolability of the borders of Ukraine in exchange for the elimination of all nuclear arsenals on its territory. The one-sided information about the past and the present confirmed the propaganda function in the Russian media.

The Russian audience still has an opportunity to know about the situation in the Crimea only from the official viewpoint. This information is created very skillfully and supported by references to the opinions of 'independent' experts and ordinary citizens interviewed by journalists. The media, thereby, create the impression that Russians fully support the political course of the President Putin about the Crimea. The Russian media also seem to be encouraged by the surveys of sociological services regularly disseminating such information. One of these reports was published in October 2014 and noted that 55 per cent of the Russians fully favor the annexation of the Crimea and another 31 per cent are 'most likely' to approve the political course of the Russian government towards the Crimea<sup>10</sup> To be honest, these surveys are often far from being accurate, but different reactions of the Russians are never questioned and publicly disputed. As a result, the Russian audience seems to believe in the rightness of the political position of the Kremlin and simultaneously mistrusts Western countries in their politics. Such a stance is undoubtedly leading to a new round of tensions between the counterparts.

As has been said above, propaganda does not permit alternative perceptions in evaluating political situations, and seems to eagerly promote warlike vocabulary. Such media coverage shapes in the minds of the audience a non-alternative picture. This can be recognized when observing the entire situation in Ukraine from the late 2014 until nowadays. In this regard television is the main information resource for millions of people living in Russia.<sup>11</sup>

Russian television started informing about the "Ukrainian case" immediately after public protests in Kiev began in the late 2013. The Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Square of Independence) at that time has become a peak of confrontation between the official Kiev and the opposition. In the meantime, from December 2013 and until May 2014 when the elections of the new President of Ukraine took place, the leading Russian TV channels have given no opportunity to express opinions to the representatives of Maidan. The viewers of the main Russian television channels (Channel 1, Channel 2-Rossya, NTV, and others) could make up a conclusion that those erecting barricades were the trouble makers who tended to break the unity of Ukraine. Of 112 news releases about Maidan being broadcast by the above television channels for four months in the evening prime time and investigated by the author, there were only five that maintained a neutral stance about what was going on in the downtown of Kiev. The others were harshly critical towards the protesters and their leaders. Meanwhile, the Maidan protesters were a very large group of people with different goals. Among the participants there were many representatives of Kiev's intellectual elite and students. Therefore from the very beginning it was completely inappropriate, contrary to the Russian mass information being aired and broadcast, to combine these people into one mass.

In his public announcement made in January 2014 for Russian and overseas journalists Russian President Putin undermined the idea that his country is getting involved into the Ukrainian conflict. He stressed that Russia has no such intention because 'it is a choice of the Ukrainian people'.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, most Russian editorial offices actively positioned the Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich as the sole defender of national interests. The very fact that Yanukovich himself along with his administration has long mired in corruption and different scandals was silenced in the Russian media. Meanwhile, the behavior of President Yanukovich who turned out to be incapable to bring the country out of crisis has become the main reason of the unrests in Kiev. The protests against his policy were increased after Yanukovich refused to reconsider the Ukrainian policy with the EU Association Agreement and remained committed to familiar economic relations with Russia. In fact, for a long time Russia kept Yanukovich on a short leash, blackmailing him with future problems that may arise during the delivery of Russian gas to Ukraine.<sup>13</sup> It was not surprising why the Russian media called the decisions and public announcements of the President of Ukraine to be

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<sup>10</sup> Rossiyane podderzhivayut prisoedinenie Krimea [Russians support the annexation of the Crimea], <http://crimey.ru/news/rossiyane-podderzhivayut-prisoedinenie-krima-k-rossii>, accessed 01.02.2015.

<sup>11</sup> Kurbangaliev, E. Rossiiskaye televidenie: sostoyamie, potrebnosti, perspektivi [Russian television: the state, demands, outlines], <http://federalbook.ru/files/SVAYZ/saderzhanie/Tom%206/VII/Kurbangaliev.pdf>, accessed 04.02.2015.

<sup>12</sup> Chto na samom dele skazal Putin ob Ukraine [What actually Putin said about Ukraine], 29 Jan. 2014, <http://www.odnako.org/blogs/chto-na-samom-dele-skazal-putin-ob-ukraine/>, accessed 05.02.2015.

<sup>13</sup> Putin poshutil o SShA i shantazhe Yanukovicha [Putin joked about the USA and blackmailing of Yanukovich], 22 Nov. 2013, [news.nur.kz](http://news.nur.kz), accessed 03.02.2015.

closer to Russia and distanced from the West as ‘wise’ and ‘far-sighted’. In the meantime, a big part of the Ukrainian society considered these actions as ‘treasonous’ against the interests of this country, and the boycotted Yanukovich decisions.<sup>14</sup>

In the midst of the Ukrainian political crisis, in April 2014, Yanukovich secretly fled from Kiev, essentially having thrown the whole situation of confrontation between the representatives of the current presidential administration and the Maidan in the lurch. In May 2014 businessman Petro Poroshenko became the new President of Ukraine. From the beginning Poroshenko wanted that new Ukrainian authorities would establish closer ties with the USA and other Western countries. This position has received a complete rejection of the Kremlin, which prompted a new round of confrontation between Moscow and Kiev and strengthened anti-Ukrainian hysteria in the Russian media.

## 6. Russian Television as a Guardian of President Putin’s Politics

In these circumstances the Russian media were the least inclined to take a balanced position between the Ukrainian and Russian sides. In accordance with the deep-rooted traditions of the media existence in Russia, TV-news regularly coming from Ukraine turned out to be politically biased and therefore took into account only the political interests of the Kremlin. The opposition leaders in Ukraine have always been treated as destroyers of peace and the people who seek to inflame nationalist sentiments. Such perception of the events in Kiev formed in the minds of Ukrainians has caused a clear aversion to Russia.

Perhaps, most significant in using this information technology from the very beginning was the Sunday analytical program *Vesti nedeli* (‘News of the week’) broadcasting on Channel 2-Rossya. The permanent host of this program, Dmitry Kiselyov, in December 2013 was nominated by Russian President Putin for the position of the head of the International Information Agency ‘Russia Today’ (similar to the name of a TV company mainly broadcasting for the international audience). Before taking this position Kiselyov proclaimed the main ideas of this agency: to cover fairly Russia’s role in the world politics and to restore justice in Russia.<sup>15</sup> It was obvious that Kiselyov sought to justify his responsibilities as an adamant defender of Putin’s politics. Therefore, during the entire Russian and Ukrainian conflict he has been tending to constantly undermine the new Ukrainian authorities that replaced the Yanukovich government and treated them as the main enemy of Russia.

This is confirmed by viewing the Kiselev’s programmes during the year, from February 2014 to February 2014, and following the content analysis of 35 of them. The propaganda approach, firstly, has been regularly visualized in specific pictures of atrocities made only by the Ukrainian troops, but never by the rebels. From the news being broadcast it was impossible to see the results of the destruction caused by Russian weapons and to hear the comments of the Ukrainian military. Secondly, Kiselyov himself and his reporters used the specific vocabulary assessing the leading actors of the conflict. Russian President Vladimir Putin in the program *Vesti Nedeli* has been numerously projected as the ‘defender of the Motherland’, the ‘gatherer of the Russian lands’ and an ‘open politician’ who tends to establish the ‘positive relationship with foreign partners’. The Ukrainian leaders who displaced the Yanukovich administration have been consistently called by Kiselyov as the ‘enemies of freedom’, ‘terrorists’, ‘destroyers of order and welfare’ and the ‘betrayers of the Ukrainian people’. During the conflict the Russian ‘non-system’ opposition constantly demanded a stop to the invasion of Russia on the South Eastern Ukraine. Kiselyov, in turn, always silenced these voices and never hesitated to call the opposition as the ‘fifth column’, the ‘enemies of democracy’ and ‘national traitors’.

Using this lexicon, Kiselev seems similar to the most odious figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, he is followed by Adolf Hitler, who used the definition of ‘national traitors’ in his book *Mein Kampf*, and the Spanish General Francisco Franco, who during his reign regularly referred to the term ‘fifth column’ in relation to the hidden enemies of his country. Nowadays Kiselyov keeps ignoring those who have different viewpoints about the situation in Ukraine. In the coverage of the conflict in Ukraine *Vesti Nedeli* is being treated as a typical propaganda source of information that does not provide real discussions about what is happening in the South-Eastern Ukraine and in Kiev. Instead of it, Kiselyov strictly controls all the viewpoints and provides opinions of those only who defend the official Russian stance.

<sup>14</sup> Oleg Soskin: “Yanukovich predal Konstitutsiyu, Partiya regionov osushchestvlyaet putch” [Yanukovich betrayed the Constitution, The Party of regions carries out a coup], 11 Dec. 2013, <http://osp-ua.info/Pro-Contra/25117-janukovich-predal-konstitutsiu-partija-regionov-osushchestvlyaet-putch--oleg-soskin.html>, accessed 04.05.2015; Russkaya narodnaya liniya [The Russian folk line], 21 Febr. 2014, [http://ruskline.ru/special\\_opinion/trus\\_predatel\\_vrag\\_naroda](http://ruskline.ru/special_opinion/trus_predatel_vrag_naroda), accessed 05.05.2015; Yanukovich predal vsekh russkikh Ukraini [Yanukovich has betrayed all Russians in Ukraine], <http://www.ua-pravda.com/old/articles/interes/911.php>, accessed 05.05.2015.

<sup>15</sup> Kolebakina, Ye. Dmitry Kiselyov sformiruet obraz Rossii dlya Zapada [Dmitry Kiselyov will shape the image of Russia for the West], 10 Dec. 2013, <http://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/93290/>, accessed 04.02.2015.



Kiselyov's programme is being supported by *Talk Show with Vladimir Solovyov* being broadcast on *Channel 2-Rossiya*, too. The show started a few years ago once a week and now is aired almost every day in prime time. Solovyov, a well-known Russian presenter, from the early stage of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has been regularly inviting to the studio only those experts and politicians whose views did not oppose the opinions of the Russian leadership. The 'reliable' persons, such as the leader of the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia Zhirinovskiy, the leader of the Russian Communist Party Zyuganov, the head of Mosfilm Shakhnazarov and some others regularly appear in the Solovyov's programme. Until recently, the presenter ignored a basic principle for any debates: the representation of, at least, two different positions. From the early 2015 he slightly changed this format by inviting in live, albeit selectively, Ukrainian experts. However, not all of them get a chance to speak out. For example, on Sunday, February 1, 2015, of five representatives from Ukraine, only two guests were able to say, whereas of five participants from the Russian side had the opportunity to voice their opinions. Like Kiselyov, Vladimir Solovyov has long ceased to perform the role of a journalist tending to keep balance between discussants and has become a pure propagandist of the current Russian political course, while neglecting basic professional ethics towards those who seem to disagree with his position.

In the last months when the clashes between the forces of Ukrainian National Army and separatists from the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics became evident, the Russian media seem to have become even more irreconcilable and close to tough propaganda. The media actively introduced numerous stereotypes designed to strengthen disdain not only to the Ukrainian politics, but also to the entire Ukrainian society, which opposes the interests of the Russian powers. By stereotypes, as a part and parcel of propaganda, the author means certain dominants designed to simplify the perception of life. They work due to the distortion of facts and smoothing problematic and contradictory aspects of political reality. Among the most pivotal stereotypes used by the Russian media in relation to the 'Ukrainian case' one would call paternalistic nature of information. The Russian media seek to establish in the minds of the audience the idea about the state protection of the interests of native Russians in Ukraine, and simultaneously these media try to show how the Kremlin is supported by the population itself. Stereotyping is determined by the lack of any other opinions.

Different stereotypes in the Russian media keep creating myths about Ukraine and the people of this country. Myth-making is visualized by using selectively chosen historical facts. For instance, the Ukrainian population, especially that part which lives in the West of this country is still being numerously called by the Russian television as *banderovtsi* (the adherents of such Ukrainian nationalists as Stepan Bandera and Yaroslav Stetsko who were supportive of the Nazi regime during World War II) and even *fascists*. In this case the Russian television seeks to mystify both situations and people and to promote an idea about consistency between the past and the present. This hoax became obvious after the elections to Verhovnaya Rada (the Ukrainian Parliament) in October 2014. The leading Russian TV channels on the eve of this event angrily reported that extremist groups are eager to find their place in politics. They referred to the nationalist Right Sector announcing a claim that it was to be in power. The Right Sector eventually got less than 1 percent of the voters and not has passed through.<sup>16</sup> Yet, this information has been silenced by the Russian media which became illustrative regarding strong wish of them to mystify the situation in Ukraine.

The unification of the stereotypes and myths shapes manipulation as being a social and political phenomenon of the propaganda work. Manipulation looks as a kind of spiritual violence promoted by invisible means following superiority over individuals being misunderstood by them (Yermakov, 1995). Nowadays manipulation developed in the Russian media on the 'Ukrainian issue' uses different information techniques. In turn, integrity of manipulative forms creates propaganda. Thanks to it, Kremlin tends to achieve certain political purposes for its own interests and to change political orientations in this country.

The Russian audience becomes a hostage of a rude violation of journalistic principles of information. Permanent information pressures affecting psyche of the population make it difficult to figure out the political situation in Ukraine. A survey of 100 people (students, lecturers, employees of the medical sphere and cultural institutions), conducted by the author in the city of Yekaterinburg in March 2015, was to clarify the personal position of the people towards the actions of Ukraine in the South-Eastern part of this country. The overwhelming majority of respondents (64) confirmed their hostility towards the official position of Kiev, 20 people turned out to be uncertain about their preferences, and only 16 had a negative reaction about Russia's activity in Ukraine. The survey highlighted that most respondents perceived the situation very fragmentarily, without deep understanding of what is happening in the conflict territory. In the meantime, 67 respondents of those being questioned openly admitted that they regularly get information about the Russian and

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<sup>16</sup> Vibori na Ukraine v Radu 2014: rezultati prinesli sensatsiyu [The elections to Rada in Ukraine: the results brought a sensation], 27 October, 2014, [http://www.topnews.ru/news\\_id\\_72447.html](http://www.topnews.ru/news_id_72447.html), accessed 01.02.2015.

Ukrainian relationship mainly from federal TV-channels, and only 8 people acknowledged that they are curious about reading and watching foreign media sources including those from Ukraine. The population is ready for grasping such a form of reflection of the Ukrainian reality, and most people feel no discomfort to the information being broadcast.

The results of the survey confirm that media propaganda against Ukraine provided by the Russian media, preferably television, fully meets the aspirations of most of the society. Meanwhile, the Russian media reflections about the Ukrainian events also fully fits with the traditional political trend in Russia, with its secrecy and ignorance of public needs. The media coverage of political conflicts in the contemporary Russia have not undergone a serious upgrade since the collapse of the USSR, and this is one of the main lessons that still has not been properly learnt in this country.

## 7. Conclusion

Due to historical legacy, media propaganda has always played a very important role in Russian society. The situation under President Putin has become tougher following a loss of objectivity and partisanship of the Russian media. The political situation in Ukraine developed since late 2013 and the current confrontation between the Ukrainian government and the authorities of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics evidently showed that media propaganda in Russia still plays the first fiddle in revealing the peculiarities of this situation. This enhances non-journalistic perception and creates a specific information picture about what is going on in Ukraine, which, in turn, negatively affects the minds of the audience. Thanks to the Russian media, reality becomes ominous and activates the 'mobilization factor', demanded by the Kremlin in terms of the modern political conflict.

In order to be 'provable', the Russian media use special propaganda techniques based on consuming numerous stereotypes and myths and resulted in full-fledged manipulation of mass consciousness. It makes the entire media process in Russia streamlined and navigated by the ambitions of those actors who tend to create the image of this country as powerful and invincible. The Russian media, thereby, help to develop these interests and serve as reliable resources of the Kremlin in the execution of its political order. This seems to be an evident illustration of how the Russian authorities are eager to build their international reputation now and in the future.

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