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The mass media and Russia's 'sphere of interests':

Mechanisms of regional hegemony in Belarus and Ukraine

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ABSTRACT: As conduits for ideas, values and geographical knowledge, the mass media contribute to the construction of regional order. Moscow-based media organisations with audiences in post-Soviet republics have been described as 'soft power tools' or 'information weapons' which aid the Russian state in its pursuit of regional dominance. However, a heavy focus on the agency of the Russian state obscures the important role that local actors and their motives often play in delivering Russian media content to large audiences in neighbouring countries. This article examines several major news providers which export content from Russia to Belarus and Ukraine, reaching large audiences thanks to partnerships that serve particular local interests and accommodate some local sensitivities. These news providers resemble mechanisms of neo-Gramscian regional hegemony, where actors in the 'periphery' are involved in perpetuating norms from the 'centre'. The article argues that Russia's political leadership, despite promoting consensual hegemony as its preferred regional order, has in fact undermined the type of media mechanisms that might have helped to sustain such an order. As the Russian state has projected narratives without regard for negative local reactions, it has made itself more reliant on coercive means to secure its declared 'sphere of interests' across formerly Soviet territory.

In November 2013, former Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko issued a strongly-worded plea for Europe to help his country 'escape' from Russia's orbit. Moscow is ready to use 'whatever means to maintain a sphere of influence', he wrote in the *Financial Times*, and Ukraine risked receding into 'a secondary state-like formation' if Russia succeeded in its geopolitical game.¹ Yushchenko's words suggest that a sphere of influence equates to the unjust, morally unacceptable denial of sovereignty to a weaker state by a more powerful one – a view which is shared by many contemporary commentators.²

Russian leaders have never hidden their desire to maintain or increase their influence in the post-Soviet republics. In the 1990s the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was already identified as the territory where Russia's 'vital interests' (*жизненные интересы, zhiznennyye interesy*) were concentrated; preventing damage to these interests was explicitly prioritised.³ During the 2008 conflict in Georgia, Russia's neighbours were famously described as its 'traditional sphere of interests' (*традиционная сфера интересов, traditsionnaya sfera interesov*) by then president Dmitriy Medvedev, who pledged to 'work very attentively' (*очень внимательно работать, ochen vnimatelno rabotat*) in these states as part of his five principles of foreign policy.⁴

The Russian claim to a sphere of *interests* sounds a lot like a claim to a sphere of *influence*.⁵ It has certainly been interpreted in that sense, pejoratively, by Western observers. Yet the establishment of a sphere of influence has not been publicly acknowledged as a goal by Russian policy-makers. The Moscow-centred regional order envisioned in so many Russian policy statements is never based explicitly on control and restrictions of sovereignty, but rather on ‘natural mutual gravity’,⁶ arising from ‘very close kinship of souls’ (*очень близкое родство душ, ochen blizkoye rodstvo dush*).⁷ In other words, Russian official discourse suggests that the post-Soviet republics and their citizens should *welcome* Russia’s leadership on integration as a means to preserve the valuable ‘cultural and civilizational inheritance’ (*культурно-цивилизационное наследие, kulturno-tsivilizatsionnoye naslediye*) that supposedly unites the region.⁸ In such a context, Russian regional influence, even dominance, would be rendered legitimate (and hence not a ‘sphere of influence’ in the pejorative sense) by the consent of everyone involved.⁹

Russia’s ambition to lead its neighbours through natural gravity, without need for coercion, brings popular geopolitics into play. Popular geopolitics refers to collective understandings of places and peoples and their social construction via the media and popular culture.¹⁰ Studies of popular geopolitics have traditionally drawn attention to (and questioned) the ‘taken-for-granted geographical reasoning’ that occurs in the

content of movies, cartoons, video games, magazines, newspapers and other media formats.¹¹ It is argued that such reasoning can serve to legitimize the imagined boundaries that position a country's collective self in relation to friendly or hostile others.¹² Scholars writing about popular geopolitics regularly look at media discourse, visuals and audiences in particular national settings.¹³ However, media content is often produced, disseminated and consumed across national borders – this is certainly true in the post-Soviet region, where media companies based in Moscow enjoy substantial transnational reach. The structures and interests which sustain cross-border media partnerships are not a traditional concern for scholars of popular geopolitics, yet the logic of popular geopolitics suggests that they might be significant for the regional and international order.

In most of the former Soviet republics, substantial numbers of citizens understand the Russian language, follow Russian celebrities, attend the Russian Orthodox Church or retain fond memories of the Soviet era when Russia was part of their homeland. The Russian state bases its hopes for legitimate regional leadership on such cultural ties generating sentiments of attachment in 'target' countries. This accounts for Russia's emphasis on 'cultural-humanitarian cooperation' (*культурно-гуманитарное сотрудничество, kulturno-gumanitarnoye sotrudnichestvo*), including support for Russian language learning, cultural exchanges and the free flow of media content from

Moscow to regional audiences.¹⁴ Among analysts of post-Soviet politics, the regional impact of the Russian media has attracted particular attention. Russian media are described as ‘soft power tools’ or ‘information weapons’ wielded by the Kremlin – sometimes to adverse, disruptive effect.¹⁵

Russia’s political leadership undoubtedly instrumentalises the media in pursuit of both domestic and foreign policy goals.¹⁶ However, the purpose of this article is to look beyond the agency of the Russian state and highlight the facilitating role played by other, *local* actors in disseminating Russian media content within the post-Soviet region. It will be argued that these local actors and their interests have been integral to the process by which Russian norms, ideas and geographical knowledge have been delivered to mass regional audiences. The collaboration of actors in the ‘periphery’ in perpetuating norms from the ‘centre’ fits a model of regional neo-Gramscian hegemony.¹⁷ In the Gramscian tradition, mass media are considered an institution which facilitates non-coercive dominance by propagating norms and ideas that undergird an established hierarchy of power.

The first part of the article draws on interviews conducted in 2011–2012 with the managers, editors and senior journalists of major media organisations that import/export news content from Russia to Ukraine and Belarus. The interviews

identify 'demand-side' factors which have traditionally sustained the presence of Russian news products in the media landscapes of Ukraine and Belarus, from common identities and the appeal of Russian celebrities among audiences to the material interests of Ukrainian businesspeople and the Belarusian state.

The second part of the article situates the interview findings in the context of changes to media regulation and the media environment which have occurred in Ukraine and Belarus during the past decade, up to the most recent period of conflict in Ukraine. By tracing the trajectory of Russian access to audiences in the two countries, the article demonstrates how the media's ability to convey ideas and norms from an aspiring regional hegemon to mass audiences in neighbouring states depends on accommodation of local sensitivities. Collaborating with local actors helps Russian media organizations to reach larger audiences than they would otherwise, but it also obliges them to accept limits on the narratives they disseminate. Recent experience suggests that when these limits are ignored, the outcome is often curtailment of access to the media market. Thus, when Russian media organisations have transmitted aggressive Kremlin-formulated narratives across borders without any regard for negative local reactions, it has undermined relationships and partnerships on which Russian hopes for 'consensual' regional hegemony depend. This leaves Russia more reliant on coercion to secure its regional ambitions.¹⁸

The article proceeds by briefly reviewing the literature on regional hegemony and elaborating on the idea that mass media are a mechanism via which regional hegemonic order can be reinforced. It then provides some contextual information about the Belarusian and Ukrainian media environments, introduces the news providers included in the empirical study, and presents findings from the interviews. The penultimate section explains how Russian media organizations have lost audience access when they have projected narratives without regard for negative local responses, particularly in Ukraine since 2014. A final, concluding section summarises the implications of this analysis for understandings of the media's role in the workings of regional influence and the nature of the post-Soviet regional order.

Regional hegemony and the media: theories and concepts

Hegemony is a contested concept in International Relations (IR). Prys identifies six different IR approaches to the phenomenon of hegemony – neorealism, the Theory of Hegemonic Stability (THS), long-cycle theories, world-system approaches, neo-Gramscianism and liberal hegemony theories.¹⁹ Neorealism and THS share a materialist foundation in presenting hegemony as the 'direct consequence of an asymmetrical distribution of power', whereas the latter four approaches allow space for conscious decision-making and ideational dynamics.²⁰ Prys cites Sassoon to put

forward a consensus definition of hegemony as being 'a political order (whether global or regional) in which the hegemon's mode of thinking becomes dominant without a regular reference to violence'.²¹ To render the concept more amenable to application at the regional level she situates hegemony on a continuum between 'domination' on the one hand (when a central state commands and extracts involuntary contributions from secondary states under a constant threat of force) and 'detachment' on the other (when the central state is focused on domestic or global politics, not the regional periphery).

Hegemony (whether regional or global) is better understood as a form of political order than as a 'strategy', as sometimes occurs.²² To call it a strategy of the central state obscures the fact that hegemony depends as much on responses at the periphery as on decisions made at the centre. This is one of the main insights of the Gramscian perspective: that hegemony is achieved at least partly by consensual means, when a leading class

'universalizes... its norms and values, thereby establishing a political and ethical harmony between dominant and subordinate groups. A dominant class rules, but effectively with and over, rather than against, subaltern classes.'²³

Hegemony, as Cronin contends, 'is not an attribute of a particular country, but rather it is a type of relationship that exists among a group of countries'.²⁴

Hopf argues, following Gramsci, that hegemonic power is maximized to the extent that hegemonic ideas – those which advance the interests of the hegemon in the language of universal interests – become taken for granted by the dominated population.²⁵

Hegemonic orders are therefore reproduced not only through economic and security institutions or the persuasion of elites, but also via

'the myriad interactions that occur among states and their citizens in cultural, educational, and informational sites... [including] university and graduate education, cultural productions, mediascapes, tourism, and other structures of ideational exchange and contact.'²⁶

This account of how hegemony becomes established bears some resemblance to Nye's account of 'soft power', or power through 'attraction'.²⁷ Kern asserts that soft power 'is most likely to be relevant in the presence of a hegemonic power, as it provides the ideational basis for the hegemon's perceived legitimacy'.²⁸

Nye's writings on soft power are criticised for lacking theoretical clarity,²⁹ so the most recent publications on the topic seek to rework the concept and address its limitations. Feklyunina, for example, proposes an interpretation of soft power based on the

reception of narratives.³⁰ Her analysis underlines the agency of audiences, which are ‘far from passive recipients of transmitted messages’ and liable to arrive at varying interpretations of narratives projected from abroad. However, there has not yet been sufficient recognition that the media which transmit narratives can have agency too. Many media organizations are far from being passive *conveyers* of messages; they may filter the narratives projected from one state to another to different degrees and in different ways.

The empirical contribution of this article is to highlight some of the lesser-studied actors, interests and complexities involved in the transmission of ideas via the media from a regional power to its less powerful neighbours. Acharya has called for regional worlds to be explored in their full diversity and interconnectedness.³¹ The following sections address interconnectedness in the post-Soviet region’s media industry and explain how and why certain connections have been sustained or broken.

‘Dual-national’ news providers within the media environments of Ukraine and Belarus

The media environments of Belarus and Ukraine have evolved in very different directions since the two countries acquired independence in 1991. Soon after Aleksandr Lukashenko became president of Belarus in 1994, he began to clamp down

on freedom of speech, placing loyal appointees in key editorial positions and developing highly restrictive legislation which makes it difficult for independent news providers to operate.³² For over 20 years, tightly controlled state-owned news outlets have therefore dominated the Belarusian media environment – particularly television, which is where most Belarusian citizens obtain their news.³³ Belarusian TV viewers require a satellite dish to access channels with news programmes that are not controlled by their government. Belsat, a Polish-funded, Belarusian-language satellite broadcaster, appears to be the only TV channel that has substantially chipped into the state’s news monopoly: it claims to have over 750,000 viewers (based on 2017 survey data).³⁴ The majority of Belarusians (over 60 per cent) can also get news online, where greater pluralism can be found. However, state-owned telecommunications firm Beltelecom controls international data transfers and can thus cut access to foreign websites when required; the state also has the ability and legal authority to block critical domestic websites, which it has done on multiple occasions.³⁵

The media environment in Ukraine is dominated by competing business interests rather than the state. As in Belarus, television is the most commonly used news medium. Ukrainian TV viewers can choose from numerous channels that belong to different Ukrainian ‘oligarchs’ and politicians (non-Russian foreign channels are available via cable but have negligible audiences). During certain periods, such as the

second presidential term of Leonid Kuchma,³⁶ the state authorities have exerted substantial pressure on editorial policy at the leading TV channels. The top channels are also known for engaging in self-censorship and tendentious reporting, particularly on issues that concern their owners' financial interests. Yet, online and print news organisations (such as *Ukrayinska Pravda* at Pravda.com.ua, and *Zerkalo Nedeli* at ZN.ua) have been providing good-quality journalism for many years, becoming more numerous over time, and Ukrainian legislation has generally been far more conducive to media freedom than legislation in Belarus.

Belarus and Ukraine thus constitute starkly different operating environments for Russian media organisations. Until 2014, Ukrainian legislation allowed Russian media companies greater leeway to operate without censorship than autocratic Belarus. However, Russian media organisations faced more substantial competition in Ukraine than in Belarus, because Ukrainian domestic broadcasters were able to develop strong production standards with investment from their wealthy oligarch owners. Belarus and Ukraine have also followed quite different trajectories in their bilateral relations with Russia, which has had ramifications for Russian access to their media environments. President Lukashenko has consistently supported the idea of Russia and Belarus being 'fraternal nations' (*братские народы, bratskiye narody*). Despite regular public spats with the Russian leadership about gas prices and oil imports, he has signed up willingly

to Russia's various integration projects for the post-Soviet space. Ukrainian leaders, in contrast, have always been warier of Russian calls to integrate. Until the Orange revolution in 2004, Ukrainian foreign policy was marked by inertia and rhetorical 'flip-flopping' between the Russian/Eurasian and Euro-Atlantic vectors.³⁷ The period 2005–2009 saw a sharp deterioration in Russian–Ukrainian relations, which only ended with the election of Viktor Yanukovich as president in 2010. Yanukovich was initially amenable to many demands from Moscow, but even he stalled on taking Ukraine into the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union; instead, he first pursued and then backtracked on an Association Agreement with the European Union, with fateful consequences.³⁸

Despite the differing political and commercial challenges of operating in Belarus and Ukraine, Russian media organisations have managed to maintain a high-profile presence in both countries. Media outlets in the post-Soviet republics which publish or broadcast news under Russian brand-names tend to be described in broad-brush terms as 'Russian media'.³⁹ However, some apparently 'Russian' channels and publications with large regional audiences could better be described as 'dual-national' media. Leading Russian broadcasters and publishers (both state and commercial) have entered into partnerships with local entities (both state and commercial) in order to deliver and sometimes tailor their products to viewers and readers in the post-Soviet

republics. Seven high-profile ‘dual-national’ media are listed in **Table 1** (five cases from Belarus) and **Table 2** (two cases from Ukraine);⁴⁰ these media are the main focus of empirical attention in this article. All of them export news content from Moscow under major Russian brands names.

Table 1: ‘Dual-national’ news providers in Belarus

Title	Description
<i>Vremya (Время, Time)</i> news bulletin on <i>ONT TV</i> channel	The flagship evening news bulletin of Russian state broadcaster <i>Pervyy Kanal (Первый Канал, First Channel)</i> , shown in Belarus on Belarusian state channel <i>ONT</i> . <i>ONT</i> shows <i>Vremya</i> immediately before its own news programme <i>Nashi Novosti (Наша Новосту, Our News)</i> as part of a single news hour which enjoys high ratings. <i>Vremya</i> dates back to the Soviet era, when it was beamed to massive audiences across the length and breadth of the USSR.
<i>Vesti (Вести, News)</i> news bulletin on <i>RTR-Belarus TV</i> channel	The flagship evening news bulletin of Russian state broadcaster <i>Rossiya 1</i> , shown in Belarus on Belarusian state channel <i>RTR-Belarus</i> . The latter was established in 2008 as a partnership between VGTRK (a Russian state holding company) and Minsk city government channel <i>STV</i> .
<i>Segodnya (Сегодня, Today)</i> news bulletin on <i>NTV-Belarus TV</i> channel	The flagship evening news bulletin of Russian state-aligned broadcaster <i>NTV</i> , shown in Belarus on Belarusian state channel <i>NTV-Belarus</i> . The latter began broadcasting in 2006 when Beltele radiokompaniya (the Belarusian National Broadcasting Company) was granted the rights to transmit <i>NTV</i> programmes. The programme schedule of <i>NTV-Belarus</i> usually differs very little from that of <i>NTV</i> .

<p><i>Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii</i> (<i>Комсомольская Правда в Белоруссии, Komsomol Truth in Belorussia</i>)</p>	<p>A mass-circulation daily newspaper which carries human interest and celebrity news alongside some socio-political stories. Owned and run as a subsidiary by Russian publishing house Komsomolskaya Pravda, which belongs to pro-Kremlin businessmen. Editors in Minsk take some content from the Russian parent newspaper but produce the majority locally. The original <i>Komsomolskaya Pravda</i> began life in 1925 as the mouthpiece of the Komsomol (Communist Union of Youth).</p>
<p><i>Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii</i> (<i>Аргументы и Факты в Белоруссии, Arguments and Facts in Belorussia</i>)</p>	<p>A mass-circulation weekly newspaper, tabloid in format but tending to write more about everyday problems than celebrity gossip. Owned and run as a subsidiary by Russian publishing house Argumenty i Fakty, which was owned by Russian billionaire brothers Aleksey and Dmitriy Ananyev as part of their Media3 holding until being sold to the Moscow municipal government in 2014. Editors in Minsk take some content from the Russian <i>Argumenty i Fakty</i> (<i>AiF</i>) but produce the majority locally. <i>AiF</i> began life in 1978 as a weekly bulletin published by Znaniye (Знания, Knowledge), a society which organized public educational lectures throughout the USSR.</p>

Table 2: ‘Dual national’ news providers in Ukraine

<p><i>Komsomolskaya Pravda v Ukraine</i> (<i>Комсомольская Правда в Украине, Komsomol Truth in Ukraine</i>)</p>	<p>A mass-circulation daily newspaper which carries human interest and celebrity news alongside some socio-political stories. Run as a franchise of Russian publishing house Komsomolskaya Pravda, it belongs to Ukrainian Media Holding (UMH). UMH was owned by its founder, Ukrainian entrepreneur Boris Lozhkin, until being sold in 2013 to Serhiy Kurchenko’s VETEK group. Kurchenko is a Ukrainian businessman associated with the circle (‘family’) of (now exiled) President Viktor Yanukovich.</p>
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<i>Argumenty i Fakty v Ukraine (Аргументы и Факты в Украине, Arguments and Facts in Ukraine)</i>	A mass-circulation weekly newspaper, tabloid in format but tending to write more about everyday problems than celebrity gossip. Run as a franchise of Russian publishing house Argumenty i Fakty, it belongs to Ukrainian Media Holding (see information on <i>Komsomolskaya Pravda v Ukraine</i> , above).
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The dual-national news providers listed here are far from being the only conduits carrying news content from Russia into Ukraine and Belarus. Most notably, Ukrainian and Belarusian internet users get news from countless Russian websites and social media platforms (an issue discussed further in the final section); Russian TV channels are also available via satellite in both countries and until 2014 Ukrainians could access Russian TV channels via cable networks too. However, the ‘dual-national’ news providers merit attention due to their particularly substantial market shares. The four tabloids have been among the most popular news publications on the Ukrainian and Belarusian markets for many years, up to the time of writing.⁴¹ The news bulletins are broadcast by three leading TV channels in Belarus with nationwide reach, so they are accessible to the majority of the Belarusian population. *NTV-Belarus* was reportedly among the top three news sources for 45 per cent of Belarusians in 2011; *RTR-Belarus* – for 30 per cent of Belarusians; and *ONT* (which broadcasts the Russian news bulletin *Vremya* just before its own bulletin, *Nashi Novosti*) – for 63 per cent of Belarusians.⁴² They were thus three of the top four TV news providers in the country. A more recent

poll in September 2014 found that around 36 per cent of Belarusians were watching Russian TV news programmes 'regularly' and a further 49 per cent were watching them 'sometimes'.⁴³ Such high viewing figures for Russian news programmes would not be possible if the Russian broadcasters had not established partnerships with their Belarusian counterparts.

Semi-structured, individual, face-to-face interviews were conducted by the author with one or two senior representatives from each of the listed news providers in Moscow (3), Minsk (6) and Kyiv (2) in 2011–2012. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and an hour and all were conducted in Russian. In general, there was a high level of willingness to participate in the research. Some interviewees spoke on the record but two interviews have been anonymized. The interviewees' comments should be considered personal opinions and do not necessarily reflect the official position of their respective media organizations.

Russian TV news on Belarusian state channels: a popular, profitable arrangement

The three TV news bulletins *Vremya*, *Vesti* and *Segodnya* are all produced in Moscow and their content is determined with input from Russian state officials.⁴⁴ The managers of *ONT*, *RTR-Belarus* and *NTV-Belarus*, which broadcast the bulletins in Belarus, have no influence over the composition of the bulletins at the production stage. They can

only affect the shape of the bulletins through censorship – by cutting out certain news reports prior to broadcast on Belarusian airwaves.

In the vast majority of cases, the bulletins go out on the Belarusian channels in their full original form. Millions of Belarusian households therefore receive the same narrative about Russia and the world as Russian households do. The narrative conveyed via *Vremya*, *Vesti* and *Segodnya* is formulated and projected strategically by Russia's political leadership;⁴⁵ it depicts a world where most problems can be traced back to aggressive American unilateralism. The fact that a majority of Belarusians and Russians share frequent and long-term exposure to this narrative is likely to support convergence in their perceptions of global threats and of the norms and values which require defending.⁴⁶

Even during times of political tension between Moscow and Minsk, transmission of Russian state TV news on Belarusian state TV channels does not cease. In 2010 a so-called 'information war' broke out, with Russian broadcasters generating some very negative reports about President Lukashenko.⁴⁷ Yet no attempt was made to remove *Vremya*, *Vesti* and *Segodnya* from the schedule of *ONT*, *RTR-Belarus* and *NTV-Belarus*. Instead, a handful of critical Russian reports were removed prior to broadcast and

Belarusian journalists were given the task of 'responding' to Russian verbal attacks with the Belarusian (official) point of view.⁴⁸

What sustains the transmission of Russian news via these 'dual national' media organizations, even during times of tension when Russian narratives are criticising the Belarusian leadership? The first explanation is audience demand, which some of the interviewees attributed to a common identity shared by Russians and Belarusians. *ONT*'s director of programming Olga Yakimenko said that a majority of viewers considered Russia and Belarus to be one country because of 'the long Soviet past, friendly ties and relations, and the fact that many have relatives and living in Russia'. She added that *ONT* had never considered dropping *Vremya* from the schedule because 'viewers would be upset if it was taken off air'.⁴⁹

A second and related factor which explains the continued rebroadcasting of the Russian-made bulletins is the financial benefit accruing to the Belarusian state broadcasters. The Russian-made news bulletins have high ratings in Belarus, which means they attract high advertising revenues. Sergey Bulatskiy, director of *NTV-Belarus*, said the channel was 'a commercial project above all' which was profitable thanks to the large audiences attracted by Russian content.⁵⁰ The Russian bulletins also allow the Belarusian channels to economize on the production costs of their own news

bulletins. The latter are able to run relatively few foreign news reports involving expensive foreign correspondents, because they can rely on the Russian channels to do such work for them. Bulatskiy pointed out that Belteleradiokompaniya lacked a network of permanent foreign correspondents due to financial constraints. 'Russia has far more', he said, adding that Belarusian viewers probably turned to the Russian news bulletins to learn about international events, as well as events in Russia. Ruslan Poddubskiy, head of news at *ONT*, said the channel's *Nashi Novosti* bulletin had 'Moscow assistants, so to speak' for reporting big events in Russia or the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).⁵¹ Usually, Belarusian broadcasters only send correspondents to foreign events involving the Belarusian president or clear Belarusian interests.

'Dual-national' tabloids: A balancing act between Moscow and officials or readers

At the 'dual-national' tabloids, staff in Minsk and Kyiv have responsibility for their own daily editorial decisions. Unlike the 'dual-national' TV channels described above, the Belarusian and Ukrainian editions of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Argumenty i Fakty* produce most of their content locally. The proportion of Russian-made content varies; sometimes it is less than a quarter and it is never more than half. Flattering stories about the Russian leadership and its actions do not dominate these tabloids in the

same way as the TV bulletins. At *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Ukraine*, for example, a journalist said that Russia and Ukraine had ‘recognized themselves as sovereign states’, so ‘information about Ukraine comes first... our political and economic situation is the priority’.⁵² An interviewee at *Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii* said that readers were most interested in ‘things that affect their lives, their region’, noting that Moscow was ‘rather far away’.⁵³

The dual-national tabloids are not therefore conduits for the Russian state’s strategic narrative in the same way as *Vremya*, *Segodnya* and *Vesti*. Nevertheless, certain aspects of their content promote or reinforce identity ties with Russia among their Ukrainian and Belarusian readerships. Requirements imposed by the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Argumenty i Fakty* publishing houses mean that the tabloids’ Ukrainian and Belarusian editors are strongly inclined to play down political tensions between Moscow and Kyiv/Minsk. The coordinator of *Komsomolskaya Pravda*’s international operations explained that the Russian publishing house would not allow any ‘filth’ (*zadocmu, gadosti*) about Russia to be printed in foreign editions.⁵⁴ A deputy editor working with *Argumenty i Fakty* regional supplements said: ‘We rely on common sense – people understand that they are working at *Argumenty i Fakty*, not some other newspaper.’⁵⁵ External control over content at these papers is thus exercised tacitly, based on internalized norms and expectations. The outcome is content in which Russia

is generally portrayed as benign, and any difficulties in bilateral relations are depicted as resolvable rather than caused by fundamentally incompatible interests.

In Belarus, editors described ignoring bilateral tensions or reporting them 'neutrally' in order to balance conflicting pressures – from Moscow partners on the one hand, and the authoritarian Belarusian government on the other. The interviewee at *Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii* said certain sensitive stories were avoided entirely due to the paper's 'complicated' position'. 'Both sides are ours' (*u me u me sbou, i te i te svoi*), she said, so if they have to report a contentious story about bilateral relations they avoid supporting one country over the other.⁵⁶ Similarly, the interviewee from *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* said:

'In everything concerning the state, we try not to enter into a conflict... If there are some very important things, we simply present them in a factual tone: here's one point of view, here's another. Here's one Russian quote, here's a Belarusian one.'⁵⁷

In Ukraine, the interviewee from *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Ukraine* said reporting on bilateral relations with Russia could be 'very difficult' given the sometimes contradictory views of Ukrainian readers and the Moscow head office.⁵⁸ Her comments indicated that the paper generally ended up acknowledging any obvious tensions, but

playing down their significance. If the tabloids' readers internalise this message that any tensions with Russia are temporary and resolvable, there is less reason for them to resist the prospect of a Russia-led regional order.

Interviewees attributed the continued popularity of the Russian tabloid brands partly to their coverage of everyday life (*быт, byt*) which transcends national boundaries.

The interviewee from *Argumenty i Fakty v Ukraine*, for example, said Ukrainian readers could identify with general 'human', 'national' (ethnic) or historical themes from Russia. The readers 'still remember the Soviet Union', so for them 'Russia is not a separate state but part of the motherland [*родина, rodina*]', she added.⁵⁹ *Argumenty i Fakty v Ukraine* therefore regularly publishes stories about ordinary Russians and their problems. *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Ukraine* took a slightly different approach in that it replaced 'archetypal stories about life in Russia' with equivalent stories about life in Ukraine. An interviewee from the paper said:

'The federal *Komsomolskaya Pravda* [Russian edition] has always been good at indirect political stories, stories about people and life situations that happen in the Russian provinces... the difficult life in some small mining town or village. You can find exactly the same situation in Ukraine – in

principle, that's what we do... we prepare material from Ukraine in the same tone.'⁶⁰

When stories about everyday Russian life appear in the mass circulation tabloids, they may say nothing about foreign politics, but they do reinforce the idea that ordinary people in Russia are 'like us' from the perspective of Ukrainian and Belarusian readers – they are extensions of the 'self' rather than foreign 'others'. Even when stories are transposed from a Russian context to a Ukrainian (or Belarusian) one, they reinforce shared understandings across the three countries of what everyday life entails, what is 'normal' and what is problematic.

Interest in Russian celebrities also drives sales of the 'dual-national' tabloids. 'We see it clearly – when [Russian singer Alla] Pugacheva is on the cover, sales rise,' said the journalist at *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Ukraine*.⁶¹

Belarusian and Ukrainian audience demand for content about the everyday problems of 'post-Soviet' existence and Russian popular culture means there are financial rewards available for importing it. In Ukraine, it was a businessman from Kharkiv, Boris Lozhkin, who pursued this money-making opportunity most actively and brought Ukrainian editions of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Argumenty i Fakty* to the market in

the late 1990s. Lozhkin has stressed in interviews that his decision to initiate business dealings with Russian publishing houses was motivated by profits, not politics:

‘You have to understand the business-model. *Argumenty i Fakty* and *Komsomolka* had the biggest circulations back then. Consider: it’s a famous brand in Ukraine, you don’t have to pay for promotion. It’s in Russian, so no translation is necessary. Do you understand, this is complete effectiveness... When you launch publications like that, you don’t even think will it work or not, there is no risk at all.’⁶²

Lozhkin himself took no clear public position on matters of domestic or international politics until 2014, when he became head of the Presidential Administration for Petro Poroshenko. Unlike most other major media owners in Ukraine, he built his fortune on the high sales and advertising potential of his various media investments, rather than exploitation of their ‘political’ value.⁶³ During the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan he claims his media took a ‘neutral’ position, a stance that was requested by his Russian partners but also ‘common sense’ from a sales perspective:

‘The owners of the Russian brands which we publish here always asked us to take a balanced position regarding Russia. You know, without any anti-Russian hysterics... But there couldn’t be such hysterics anyway. Because

Komsomolskaya Pravda is a newspaper of that part of Ukraine which is sympathetic towards Russia. Which means logically you have to take the same position in order not to irritate the reader.’⁶⁴

This statement is very much in line with the logic of neo-Gramscian hegemony: media reproduction of a worldview supporting Russian dominance is driven in a consensual process by interplay between ideational factors (values among the Ukrainian population) and material ones (the commercial interests of Ukrainian investors).

In Belarus, the tabloids deliver profits back to Moscow, but profitability still appears to be the principal driving force behind their operations and editorial policy. As an interviewee from *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* put it:

‘Komsomolka is a business project. However people judge it due to its name and shareholders, pro-Kremlin or whatever, it is still a business project. So, the shareholders’ interest lies in having a profitable business in Belarus, which operates in a stable way, with a growing readership, so the capital increases.’⁶⁵

The same interviewee stressed that the paper worked ‘above all in the interests of the reader, because the reader buys the paper every day and if we do not answer his questions he simply stops buying’. A sceptic might wonder whether *Komsomolka’s* Russian shareholders might also have political motives that were underplayed by

interviewee for reasons of normative acceptability – this cannot be ruled out.

However, the environment in authoritarian Belarus is such that a high-profile politically motivated media business independent of the Belarusian authorities would be unlikely to survive very long.

Unilateral projection of Russian media content and regional backlash

The ‘dual national’ media organizations discussed above constitute mechanisms of hegemonic norm transmission that are propelled by demand and pecuniary interests in the ‘periphery’ as much as the political ambitions of the ‘centre’. However, other media outlets transmit Russian media content across borders with little or no local consent or facilitation. In an extreme example, the Russian military intervention in Crimea in 2014 led to the forcible seizure of broadcasting infrastructure and the displacement of Ukrainian channels by Russian ones. Russia’s main federal TV channels are independently broadcasting their international versions via satellite throughout the post-Soviet region without need for local consent or assistance, while the internet also allows Russian media companies to reach international audiences independently of local partners. The transmission of Russian channels via cable television – another important conduit for Russian news exports – does not involve ‘dual-national’ collaboration on the scale described in the previous section. However, local cable

companies must agree to carry the Russian channels in the packages they sell and they must abide by local legislation in doing so.

The fate of Russian channels on Ukrainian and Belarusian cable networks provides a good illustration of the problems an aspiring hegemon may encounter if it projects narratives unilaterally without regard for negative reactions in the 'peripheral' states it hopes to influence. Cable networks in Ukraine and Belarus used to carry the international versions of Russian federal channels, and did so profitably. However, cable transmissions of the main Russian channels are now banned in both countries. In Belarus, the authorities stopped cable networks from carrying the international versions of Russia's main channels in 2009.⁶⁶ Content from Russian television has continued to be broadcast both via cable and terrestrially – but only on the Belarusian state-controlled channels, *RTR-Belarus*, *NTV-Belarus* and *ONT*. This arrangement gave the Belarusian authorities the ability to censor Russian content when needed and it was almost certainly put in place to defend against potential Russian 'information attacks', i.e. broadcasts criticising the Belarusian status quo. Critical material about Belarusian President Lukashenko was censored during the period of bilateral tensions in 2010, for example. Since the arrangement was introduced, the Russian state's freedom to communicate with Belarusian citizens about domestic Belarusian politics has therefore been curtailed.

In Ukraine, the main Russian state channels were first banned from cable networks in 2008 after they showed tendentious, misleading reports about political developments during the pro-Western presidency of Viktor Yushchenko.⁶⁷ That ban turned out to be difficult to enforce and fairly short-lived, but new bans imposed since early 2014 have been more durable and comprehensive.⁶⁸ Indeed, a whole raft of legislative and regulatory changes have been introduced in Ukraine since the 'revolution of dignity' (*революція гідності, revolyutsiya hidnosti*) to reduce consumption of all kinds of Russian media content, as Russian propaganda has officially been acknowledged as a major threat to national security.⁶⁹ Banning cable transmissions of the main Russian federal channels was just the first step.⁷⁰ Dozens of other Russian channels were later added to the cable blacklist;⁷¹ then the screening of Russian movies and TV series made since 2014 was banned as well.⁷² The rules that require high quotas of content on Ukrainian TV channels to be made in Europe have been changed, so that Russian-made content no longer counts as European and is therefore being squeezed out of TV schedules.⁷³ Broadcasters must also abide by new language quotas stipulating that 75 per cent of content on all national TV channels must be in Ukrainian;⁷⁴ there are similar but slightly lower Ukrainian language quotas for radio broadcasts. The National Council for TV and Radio Broadcasting has been given the power to impose hefty fines for infringements of these regulations. Most recently, sanctions have been imposed on

major Russian media companies including Yandex, Odnoklassniki, Mail.ru, VKontakte and the federal broadcasters; a presidential decree instructs Ukrainian internet providers to block their websites.⁷⁵ Even book imports from Russia have been targeted.⁷⁶

It is not impossible for people in Ukraine to get around the abovementioned restrictions and access Russian media content. Satellite dishes still provide access to Russian television; website blocks can be bypassed using VPNs and anonymisers. Yet, the legislative and regulatory changes have certainly had an impact on media consumption. For example, survey data reported by the Broadcasting Board of Governors indicates that the weekly reach of *RTR Planeta* (the international version of Russian state channel *Rossiya 1*) in Ukraine fell from 18.7 per cent in 2012 to 8.8 per cent in 2014.⁷⁷ By early 2017, the proportion of Ukrainians able to receive the main Russian federal channels had fallen to just 11–13 per cent (79 per cent of those who still had access were using satellite dishes and some people in the east could still get Russian channels via a terrestrial signal).⁷⁸ Other surveys show a sharp deterioration in Ukrainian attitudes towards Russian media;⁷⁹ by 2017 less than 2 per cent of Ukrainians said they trusted Russian TV reports about the conflict in Donbas.⁸⁰

Thus, the Russian state's tendency to heavy-handedly project narratives which offend local interests in 'peripheral' countries has undermined the capacity of Russian media organizations to reach audiences in those countries. In Belarus, day-to-day Russian access to audiences has been maintained, but the Belarusian authorities have developed quite effective tools to censor or block Russian content which they find objectionable. In Ukraine, most of the major media conduits that used to disseminate norms and ideas from Russia have suffered substantial long-term damage since 2014. Interestingly, the two 'dual-national' tabloids discussed above, *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Ukraine* and *Argumenty i Fakty v Ukraine*, are among the few 'Russian' outlets to have escaped the legislative clampdown. Their balancing act and accommodation of local sensitivities, described in the interviews from 2011–2012, appears to have continued and has probably protected them from the purge affecting other Russian media organisations on the Ukrainian market.

Discussion: Media, regional influence and the post-Soviet regional order

Gramsci understood the mass media as a mechanism via which hegemonic ideas are reproduced in society – an institution which can facilitate harmony between dominant and subordinate classes. This article has suggested that media organizations can sometimes perform a comparable function in supporting hegemonic order within a

region. The partnerships established by Russian broadcasters and publishers with local entities in Ukraine and Belarus have helped to disseminate content which portrays Russian power as benign, bilateral tensions as fleeting rather than fundamental, and ordinary Russians as similar to ordinary Ukrainians and Belarusians. If internalised, such content has the potential to reduce resistance to Russian regional leadership.

The article has also argued that actors in the regional 'periphery' and their motives should be considered alongside the ambitions of the regional 'centre' to explain how and why the mass media reproduce hegemonic values. In Ukraine and Belarus, consumer demand and the pecuniary interests of the state and private investors have helped Russian media content to reach wide audiences.

The 'Russian' media with audiences in the post-Soviet region are not homogeneous, however. Some media organizations with links to Moscow (such as the 'dual-national' tabloids) make allowances for sensitivities in neighbouring states and minimise contention to preserve their access. Other media organisations – particularly Russia's federal TV channels – project contentious messages with little regard for negative reactions in the 'periphery'. The latter approach has generated resistance and restrictions on information imports from Moscow which are likely, over the long term,

to undermine the Russian leadership's prospects of building a consensual hegemonic order in its regional neighbourhood.

Russian influence via the mass media in the post-Soviet republics is a complex phenomenon. When 'Russian' media with regional audiences are labelled as 'tools' or 'weapons' of the Kremlin, it obscures both the diversity of conduits via which Russian content is exported and the role of local actors in sustaining the content flow.

Differentiating between Russian media organisations according to their mode of international operation – consensus-based partnerships versus unilateral projection – can contribute to a more nuanced view of the mechanics of Russian regional influence.

It seems the Russian leadership has developed no coherent strategy for engaging the mass media in defence of its 'sphere of interests'. In statements and policy documents, consensus-based regional hegemony is repeatedly depicted as the type of order to which Russia aspires; the potential of media exports to facilitate such an order is also recognised. Yet the tendentious and often inaccurate nature of the narrative projected via Russia's state-controlled media is inflicting damage on the very mechanisms which have traditionally reproduced norms, ideas and geographical knowledge from Moscow. The approach to mediated communication adopted by Russian officials is leaving them more reliant on coercion to consolidate Russian leadership of the post-

Soviet region. Domestic priorities (i.e. maintaining support for the president and government by inflating external threats) are the principal drivers of this approach. However, messages and content intended primarily for the Russian domestic audience cannot be concealed from audiences in the periphery, who often react negatively, to the detriment of Russian foreign policy interests.

A limitation of this study is its reliance on a rather small number of interviews to explain the behaviour of the 'dual-national' news providers (it is possible that interviewees could not be fully open about political factors influencing their work). As always, further research would help to test the validity of the arguments presented. Additional avenues which merit investigation include the motivations of a wider range of actors who help spread hegemonic ideas via the media, such as those in the entertainment industry.

Another potential criticism of this study is that it focuses excessively on 'traditional' media organisations best known for their print and broadcast output (although it should be noted that all the media organisations discussed in the empirical section have an online presence too). For younger generations, social media – and the internet more generally – are increasingly important sources of news. Russian 'influence operations' on social networks have become a high-profile topic of global concern;

commentators are wondering whether Russia has 'mastered' social media platforms so well that it can now even swing elections in Western democracies.⁸¹ If Russia has indeed developed effective online techniques for manipulating foreign public opinion, one could perhaps argue that access to mass audiences via traditional media in places like Ukraine no longer matters very much for its foreign policy ambitions. There are, however, good grounds to be sceptical of such a view. Social media audiences are by their nature fragmented. Russian content disseminated via social media is more likely to circulate among small, sympathetic audiences than to reach the broad audiences of a familiar national tabloid or cable TV channel. By targeting a sympathetic minority with inflammatory social media messages, Russian communicators can hope to achieve some 'disruption', which is often said to be their aim.⁸² Yet an ability to disrupt neighbouring states by inciting minorities is not what Russia needs to achieve its vision of a hegemonic regional order. Rather, Russia needs the legitimacy that comes from *mass* popular acquiescence to Russian leadership. In Ukraine, the Russian state's communicative tactics are not serving this goal at all.

To conclude, cross-border media connections are an important feature of the twenty-first century world which have implications for regional order, as the case of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine has illustrated. However, it is insufficient to study regional influence via the media exclusively from the perspective of the dominant state's

ambitions and agency. Rather, future analysis should pay due attention to the relationships and motives that sustain the transmission of media content across borders, from senders via deliverers to receivers.

Notes

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²¹ Prys (note 16) p. 26; A.S. Sassoon (ed.) *Approaches to Gramsci* (London: Writers and Readers 1982), p. 94

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³⁰ V. Feklyunina, 'Soft power and identity: Russia, Ukraine and the 'Russian world(s)''', *European Journal of International Relations* 22/4 (2016) pp. 773-796.

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³⁷ T. Kuzio, 'Neither East nor West: Ukraine's Security Policy under Kuchma', *Problems*

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Security Provider? Russia's Efforts to Promote Regional Integration after the 2013–2014 Ukraine Crisis', *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57/2 (2016) pp. 180–202.

⁴⁰ Details of ownership come from press reports and editorial staff interviewed for the study. However, media ownership in Ukraine and Belarus is far from transparent so inaccuracies cannot be ruled out.

⁴¹ In 2012 the reported per-issue readership of *Argumenty i Fakty v Ukraine* (published weekly) was 1.6 million, with 0.8 million for *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Ukraine* (published daily). This put them among the top four Ukrainian news publications by circulation. By 2015 their readership figures had fallen to around 0.2 million each (reflecting problems in the Ukrainian economy that affected all tabloids), yet they were still among the most popular publications in Ukraine; see <http://vesti-ukr.com/strana/127260-gazeta-vesti-stala-izdaniem-nomer-odin-v-kieve-i-bolshih-gorodah>. *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* and *Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii* were similarly market leaders in Belarus in 2012. Each daily edition of the former had a weekly print run of around 50,000, rising to 300,000 for the weekly *tolstushka* ('fat' edition containing the TV guide) and its editor claimed a total readership of around one million. *AiF v Belorussii* reported a weekly print run of roughly 150,000. The only other Belarusian news publication with a comparably high circulation was state-owned *Sovetskaya Belorussiya (Belarus Segodnya)*.

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⁴⁷ J. Szostek, 'Russian Influence on News Media in Belarus', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 48/2–3 (2015) pp. 123–135.

⁴⁸ V. Dudko, first deputy director of STV responsible for RTR-Belarus, author interview conducted in Minsk on 24 October 2012.

⁴⁹ O. Yakimenko, programmes director at ONT, author interview conducted in Minsk on 22 October 2012.

⁵⁰ S. Bulatskiy, main director at NTV Belarus, author interview conducted in Minsk on 18 October 2012.

⁵¹ R. Poddubskiy, head of the news department at ONT, author interview conducted in Minsk on 22 October 2012.

⁵² Journalist with experience working for *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Ukraine* (anonymous), author interview conducted in Kyiv on 27 September 2011.

⁵³ M. Delorentis Polezhayeva, deputy editor-in-chief at *Argumenty i Fakty v Belorussii*, author interview conducted in Minsk on 16 October 2012.

⁵⁴ T. Mityusova, head of the project to publish *Komsomolskaya Pravda* abroad, author interview conducted in Moscow on 15 February 2011.

⁵⁵ Sergey Kalinin, deputy editor for work with *Argumenty i Fakty* regional supplements, author interview conducted in Moscow on 22 March 2011.

⁵⁶ Delorentis Polezhayeva (note 50).

⁵⁷ Journalist with experience working for *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* (anonymous), author interview conducted in Minsk on 27 October 2012.

⁵⁸ Journalist (note 49).

⁵⁹ Svetlana Gollands, deputy editor-in-chief at *Argumenty i Fakty v Ukraine*, author interview conducted in Kyiv on 29 September 2011.

⁶⁰ Journalist (note 49).

⁶¹ Journalist (note 49).

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