



Szostek, J. (2017) News consumption and anti-Western narratives in Russia: a case study of university students. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 69(2), pp. 284-302.

This is the author accepted manuscript.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publishers' version if you wish to cite from it.

The published version is available:

doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2016.1274019>

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/168772/>

Deposited on: 13 September 2018

# **News consumption and anti-Western narratives in Russia:**

## **A case study of university students**

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ABSTRACT This article investigates the relationship between habits of news consumption and geographical imaginations in Russia. It uses results from a survey of students at a Moscow university to demonstrate an association between the news sources used by respondents and their acceptance of the Russian authorities' narrative about the West. Students who used at least one state-aligned news source were inclined to express greater agreement with the official (negative) narrative about the West than students who did not use any state-aligned news sources. However, some of the Russian authorities' anti-Western claims resonated strongly even among the non-users of state-aligned sources.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: I am extremely grateful to Jason Dittmer, Richard Mole, Peter Duncan, Allan Sikk, Paul Chaisty, Kanishka Bhattacharya and participants in the 2015 'Popular Geopolitics' workshop at UCL-SSEES who shared their thoughts and comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript. I would also like to thank the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and CEELBAS (Centre for East European Language Based Area Studies) for the funding which made the research possible; Florian Toepfl for some invaluable practical help; and everyone at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow (teachers and students alike) for their assistance and cooperation at the data collection stage.

The crisis in Ukraine that began in 2013 has sparked a great deal of interest in the narratives relayed by the Russian news media. Russia's political leaders publicly interpreted the 'Euromaidan' protests and subsequent ousting of Viktor Yanukovich from the Ukrainian presidency through a lens of unconscionable Western interference: the West, led by the USA, had rashly backed a 'right-wing coup' in Kyiv with the aim of weakening Russia and preserving its own global predominance. News media controlled by or loyal to the Russian political leadership have reproduced, developed and amplified intensely negative narratives about the West and Ukraine's post-Yanukovich government, while hailing the resistance of militias fighting for the self-proclaimed people's republics of Luhansk and Donetsk. The Russian media have caused consternation internationally because of the presumed impact of their narratives on various audiences. Media manipulation has been discussed as an essential element of Russia's 'hybrid war' against Ukraine (Wilson 2014, p. 192) and blamed for stoking separatism and instability. Some commentators have warned that the Russian media are managing to 'sow confusion' and 'proliferate falsehoods' in a way that also risks weakening global resolve to take action against Moscow's behaviour (Pomerantsev & Weiss 2014).

Yet the audience which matters most of all to the Kremlin is in fact the domestic one. Russia's latest military doctrine identifies 'information influence on the population' among the 'main internal military dangers' threatening the country. The doctrine warns that such influence, of unspecified origins, could undermine the 'historical, spiritual and patriotic traditions of defending the fatherland' among young people in particular.<sup>1</sup> Effective state control over the domestic circulation of narratives is thus explicitly recognised as a vital issue of national security. Underlying the Kremlin's concern in this area is rising internet access, which was estimated to extend to almost 60 per cent of the Russian population by the start of 2015.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to previous eras, a majority of Russians are no longer obliged to rely on state television for news, as the internet puts a vast number of alternative options at their disposal (this is true even for Russians who lack foreign language skills, given the extent and diversity of Runet). Individuals are able to extend or restrict their 'media repertoires' (Hasebrink & Domeyer 2012; Hasebrink & Popp 2006) and the range of geopolitical narratives to which they are exposed. Therefore, rather than focusing exclusively on the agency of the Russian state and its repressive treatment of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Voennaya doktrina Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, 2014, available at: [www.rg.ru/2014/12/30/doktrina-dok.html](http://www.rg.ru/2014/12/30/doktrina-dok.html), last accessed 21 August 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Russia internet users, 2015, available at: [www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/russia](http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/russia), last accessed 21 August 2015.

media, the agency of individual Russian citizens and variation in how they follow the news must also be acknowledged – and studied for any implications regarding how they view the world.

The present article brings a focus on individual agency and variation in the use of different news sources to the study of popular geopolitics. Popular geopolitics is a subfield of critical geopolitics (within political geography) that deals with the discursive constitution and partition of global space in everyday life, particularly among non-elites (Dittmer & Dodds 2013). For over 20 years, scholars have worked under the banner of popular geopolitics to show how particular understandings of regional and global politics are mobilised among the public through newspapers, magazines, films, cartoons and other artefacts of popular culture. Initial efforts were concentrated on the analysis of geographical representations in texts and images, but the past decade has seen increased emphasis placed on audiences and the way individuals ascribe meaning to texts and images in the process of media consumption (Dittmer & Dodds 2008). The literature acknowledges the agency of audiences with respect to the way readers and viewers can generate their own divergent meanings from the media they consume. However, it neglects to discuss people's agency in 'becoming' the audience for particular media products in the first place. Moreover, empirical research on reception within popular geopolitics has so far approached audiences as discrete groups pertaining to particular films or other cultural artefacts (Dodds 2006; Dittmer & Larsen 2007). This somewhat obscures the fact that individuals today are likely to be part of the audience for many different media – in the course of their daily life they may browse dozens of websites, TV channels and other media that relay competing or reinforcing narratives with geopolitical content. When exploring how and why audiences produce geopolitical meaning, it is therefore important to consider the range of texts or media they consume, rather than focusing only on specific texts or media in isolation.

To investigate the link between news media use and geographical imaginations, this article draws on a survey ( $n = 452$ ) conducted among university students in Moscow in Autumn 2014. The survey questionnaire was designed to assess how strongly the students agreed or disagreed with various claims about the West voiced frequently in the Russian state-aligned media. It also asked which media sources (TV channels, websites, etc.) the students used to follow the news. The students who participated in the survey are not 'typical' Russians by any means. They come from the more privileged, urban and educated end of society; they are more likely to have travelled and to have had greater contact with foreigners. Therefore, the findings may not be generalisable to the Russian population as a whole. However, the students vary in terms of the sources they use to follow the news (the independent variable of particular interest), while being very similar in age, education level and place

of residence (demographic variables which might have a confounding effect). These qualities facilitate exploration of the relationship between media consumption and geographical imaginations.

Analysis of the survey results generates mixed evidence about the relationship between the students' news media use and their views of the West. Use (versus non-use) of state-aligned sources was found to predict substantially stronger agreement with the Russian state's anti-Western narrative. However, even students who did not use any state-aligned sources were more inclined to agree than disagree with many of the state's anti-Western claims. Moreover, accessing relatively independent and foreign-owned sources that convey 'alternative' perspectives on political events had only a small statistical effect on acceptance of the Russian state's narrative about the West. Contrary to popular wisdom, these findings therefore indicate that anti-Western sentiments in Russia (at least amongst the studied group) are not entirely attributable to consumption of the dominant pro-Kremlin media and a failure to access alternative viewpoints.

The paper proceeds as follows. It begins with an overview of existing research relevant to the role of mass media in shaping geographical imaginations among the public. A section on research design and methods explains how the survey data contained in this paper were generated. The survey results are then presented and subjected to multiple regression analysis, before the paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of this study, its limitations, and avenues for future research.

#### *Popular geopolitics, mass media audiences and the case of Russia*

Scholars in the subfield of popular geopolitics are concerned with 'the images ordinary citizens have of their state and others' and the (re)production of such images in popular culture (O'Loughlin, Ó Tuathail & Kolossov 2004). Their work has highlighted how particular understandings of world politics are embedded and promulgated in various types of media, from cartoons and comic strips to movies, newspapers and magazines (e.g. Sharp 1993; Sharp 1996; Dittmer 2005; Dittmer 2013; McFarlane & Hay 2003). Such research falls within the broader literature of critical geopolitics, aimed at deconstructing geopolitical discourse to expose its political deployment (Dalby 1990). Through discourse, ideas about domestic order and foreign threats are socially constructed, pride can be maintained and aggression legitimized (Dijkink 1996, p. 146).

In the conceptual framework for critical geopolitics advanced by Ó Tuathail (2003), the term 'geographical imagination' is proposed to refer to the acts of identification and boundary-formation in which population groups engage as they understand their state's position within the world community (i.e. defining the national

self, foreign others, ‘them’ and ‘us’). In the early to mid-2000s, O’Loughlin and colleagues investigated Russian geographical imaginations (terming them geopolitical imaginations) on the basis of nationally representative surveys of public opinion about foreign policy issues (O’Loughlin, Ó Tuathail & Kolossov 2004; O’Loughlin & Talbot 2005; O’Loughlin, Ó Tuathail & Kolossov 2005; O’Loughlin, Tuathail & Kolossov 2006). The socio-demographic variables of age, gender, religion, education level, social status, region of residence and settlement size were found to affect survey responses. The authors posited in their conclusions that media coverage of world events could have a dramatic impact on geopolitical imaginations, but they did not incorporate exposure to media narratives as a variable in their study. Rather surprisingly, geographical/geopolitical imaginations among the public have quite rarely been researched in direct conjunction with geopolitical narratives in media and popular culture. Dittmer and Dodds (2008) have pointed out that studies of popular geopolitics tend to emphasize discursive analysis and geographical representations, while neglecting audiences and the meanings they construct out of popular culture and related texts. They have called for greater attention to be paid ‘to reception and the kind of ways in which audiences engage and make sense, for example, of media’ (Dittmer & Dodds 2008, p. 440). Some progress has since been made in this regard, with several studies looking at movie audiences (for example, Ridanpää 2014; Dittmer & Dodds 2013; Anaz & Purcell 2010). However, public responses to geopolitical narratives in mass media remain for now a nascent area of geographical research. Foregrounding the audience in research on popular geopolitics poses methodological challenges, because individuals’ responses to narratives are generally less accessible to the researcher than the narratives themselves.

There is, of course, a vast literature within the field of media and communication studies which pertains to the reception of media messages among audiences and media effects on audience attitudes and beliefs (for example, see Nabi & Oliver 2009; O’Keefe 2003; Bryant, Thompson & Finklea 2013; Nightingale 2011). Numerous studies within this field have probed the impact of international news coverage on public impressions of the world and international affairs. There are strong grounds to believe that the news media have an agenda-setting function in determining *which* countries and international issues audiences think about (Iyengar & Simon 1993; Wanta & Hu 1993; Soroka 2003), but the evidence regarding their power to shape popular *beliefs and attitudes* towards countries and issues is more mixed. Wanta, Golan and Lee (2004) found a positive correlation between the amount of negative media coverage given to a country by American television and the proportion of Americans who thought negatively about that country. Yet curiously, no correlation was found between positive media coverage and positive public perceptions. An earlier study by Salwen and Matera (1992) found that media coverage did *not* influence American public assessments of foreign nations as friends or enemies of the United

States: the Soviet Union was named as the USA's 'worst enemy' despite media coverage of improving bilateral relations. Semetko and colleagues (1992) found that Americans were generally inclined to like foreign countries more if they were attentive to foreign news on television (it should be noted that only nine foreign countries featured in the study). However, interest in politics and measures of contact (i.e. travel to the country in question or having friends or family ties there) were also found to be significant, at least in the case of positive feelings about West Germany; thus, media coverage was 'not the only, or even the major, foundation' for the formation of opinions. In a similar vein, a classic study by Gamson (1992, p. 117) demonstrated that audiences integrated 'media discourse, popular wisdom and experiential knowledge' to construct meaning from TV news – although when it came to news about the Arab-Israeli conflict, the only international issue considered in the study, media discourse was more important than the other two resources.

The studies mentioned above, like the majority of empirical studies in the field of media and communication, are based on evidence from Western democracies with pluralistic media environments – above all, the USA. Research on media audiences in authoritarian or hybrid regimes, including post-Soviet Russia, is relatively scarce. The studies that do exist deal more with issues of domestic politics than geopolitics. Toepfl (2013; 2014), for example, used in-depth interviews to uncover the 'micro-processes' via which young Russians make sense of online and offline news. He found that the way individuals interpreted a TV report about the start of an election campaign and a blog post about an opposition activist's arrest was affected by their stocks of knowledge relating to four 'facets of critical news literacy': (1) the segmentation of the news environment, (2) news production processes, (3) the 'constructedness' of political messages and (4) the role of media in Russian society. Toepfl hypothesized that individuals in hybrid regimes are more likely to decode news from an 'oppositional' or 'negotiated' position (i.e. not to accept official narratives at face value) when they are 'broadly informed' – when they follow the news actively and regularly access news discourses from beyond the official sphere. Earlier studies of the Russian news audience produced somewhat contradictory findings about the susceptibility of viewers to narratives on television. Mickiewicz (2005; 2008) argued on the basis of focus group observations that Russians were quite adept at critically interpreting TV news stories. She found participants to be widely sceptical about one-sided stories, with their scepticism stemming from personal experiences and abstract reasoning. Oates (2006, p. 145), on the other hand, observed that her focus group participants had been influenced by television when deciding how to cast their vote at election time, *even though* they claimed to be 'cynical and aware of bias on channels'. Her participants largely realised that they were not getting the whole story from TV about the Chechen war, yet at the same time resented stories which offended their national pride.

Some participants preferred to watch channels they considered the most ‘authoritative’ over channels they considered the most ‘trustworthy’. Such findings indicate that the link hypothesized by Toepfl between critical news literacy and the decoding of messages by audiences may not be straightforward. Viewers may internalize narratives from state TV despite recognizing that objectivity is lacking, while the likelihood of an ‘oppositional’ decoding may be affected by emotions (e.g. national pride), not just cognition (‘stocks of knowledge’). This seems particularly likely to affect the reception of media content about foreign affairs, given that patriotic sentiments may well be involved.

During the latest crisis in relations between Russia and the West, public opinion polls have tracked soaring anti-Western sentiment among the Russian population and virtually all fingers have pointed to Russian television as the primary explanation (for example, Gudkov 2014). State control over television has been strong in Russia for over a decade (Belin 2004). The leading channels with nationwide reach, *Pervyi Kanal*, *Rossiya 1* and *NTV*, are essentially public relations instruments for the state authorities; their managers attend regular meetings at the Kremlin to ensure the required editorial line is taken (Borodina 2007; Taratuta 2014). There is an undeniably close alignment between messages promoted by Russian leaders via these channels and public perceptions of international issues and other countries as recorded in nationwide surveys. For example, over 70 per cent of respondents in a nationally representative poll agreed that international sanctions against Russia were motivated by Western desire to weaken and humiliate Russia (against just 6 per cent who saw them as an attempt to halt the bloodshed in Ukraine).<sup>3</sup> Some 57 per cent of respondents said there was no need to heed Western criticism of Russia.<sup>4</sup>

Such correlations between the narratives on TV and nationwide public opinion are hardly surprising when one bears in mind that in 2014 almost 50 per cent of Russians were getting their news via a single medium – and for most, that medium was television (Volkov & Goncharov 2014). The range of alternative information sources accessed by individuals has long been considered an important factor in determining the impact of particular media messages on those individuals’ beliefs (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur 1976; Halpern 1994). Half the Russian population were apparently not accessing any information sources about the West’s role in global politics other

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<sup>3</sup> *Maidan, Krym, sanktsii*, 2014, available at: [www.levada.ru/30-12-2014/maidan-krym-sanktsii](http://www.levada.ru/30-12-2014/maidan-krym-sanktsii), last accessed 21 August 2015.

<sup>4</sup> *Vneshnyaya politika Rossii: orientiry i kritika*, 2015, available at: [www.levada.ru/13-01-2015/vneshnyaya-politika-rossii-orientiry-i-kritika](http://www.levada.ru/13-01-2015/vneshnyaya-politika-rossii-orientiry-i-kritika), last accessed 21 August 2015.



than state TV channels, which in 2014 were broadcasting lengthy anti-Western diatribes night after night. Even if media messages do not work like a ‘magic bullet’, it is implausible to think that the TV-dependent half of Russian society could escape being affected by such consistent negativity.

The interesting question is whether the opinion-leading power of television in Russia might wane as the internet reduces public reliance on television news. The mass protests against electoral fraud which Russia experienced in 2011–2012 showed that in matters of domestic politics the Russian state authorities are not omnipotent in their ability to dictate the news agenda and the public mood. On occasion, independent online voices can create a ‘credibility gap’ between public knowledge and state TV reporting (Oates 2013, p. 173). Theoretically, a ‘credibility gap’ could affect the reception of the authorities’ geopolitical narratives among people who regularly follow international news online and not just on TV. The authorities have taken measures to reduce this risk: legislative amendments have been passed making it easier to block websites and prosecute bloggers for what they write.<sup>5</sup> Changes in editorial leadership have been forced through at the state news agency RIA Novosti (Tétrault-Farber 2013), and the widely-read online publication Lenta.ru (Bodner 2014; Fredheim 2016). Nevertheless, there are currently no state-imposed obstacles or restrictions that prevent Russian internet users from browsing the web in most of its infinite diversity. Russians with internet access can visit the website of the BBC’s Russian Service, or the anti-Kremlin newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, or various online Ukrainian news services just as easily as they access Russian state-controlled news providers. If Russian internet users are still relying on the state-controlled media over or alongside the alternatives, it is important to recognise this behaviour and explain it (see Szostek 2016a) rather than focusing exclusively on state control, as if the state were the only actor with agency in the Russian media landscape. Moreover, as larger numbers of Russians do start accessing diverse narratives across different (state and non-state) news sources, it is important to study all the implications of this trend – not just with regard to domestic Russian politics, but also with respect to geopolitics and geographical imaginations.

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<sup>5</sup> *Federalnyi zakon Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 28 dekabrya 2013 g. N 398-F3*, 2013, available at: [www.rg.ru/2013/12/30/extrem-site-dok.html](http://www.rg.ru/2013/12/30/extrem-site-dok.html), last accessed 21 August 2015; *Federalnyi zakon Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 5 maya 2014 g. N 97-F3*, 2014, available at: [www.rg.ru/2014/05/07/informtech-dok.html](http://www.rg.ru/2014/05/07/informtech-dok.html), last accessed 21 August 2015.

*Research design, methods and data*

The findings below come from a survey that was conducted among students at Moscow's Higher School of Economics (HSE) during September and October 2014. HSE is one of Russia's highest-ranked universities, yet was founded relatively recently, in 1992. From the start it has been oriented towards social and economic reform and has maintained strong ties with partners in the West. It specializes in economics, social sciences, mathematics and computer science. All its students are expected to reach a high level of proficiency in English and must attend weekly English classes until they have done so.

As mentioned in the introduction, HSE was chosen as the site for the study because the internet access and language skills of its students give them an extensive range of options regarding where to obtain news. Variation in media use (the explanatory variable of particular interest) was therefore expected to be high, while potentially confounding demographic variables could be held fairly constant. It is also possible to argue, as Mickiewicz (2014) does, that the views and habits of students at an elite university like HSE are worth studying despite their dissimilarity to the Russian masses, because such students have the potential to become an influential class in Russia's future. Previous research on geopolitical imaginations among Russian university students, particularly Müller (2009) focused primarily on the education process and paid little attention to news media consumption. Last but not least, HSE was more open than other institutions to letting a foreign researcher work with its students (other universities in Moscow were approached, but refused to allow access).

The target population for the survey comprised second-year undergraduates across all HSE degree programmes. A list of these students with contact details was not obtainable. Therefore, a random cluster sample was achieved by using English-language teaching groups as the sampling unit.<sup>6</sup> A sampling frame was constructed from the names of English-language teachers gleaned from degree programme timetables. Permission was obtained to contact a number of English-language teachers (randomly selected) from the majority of degree programmes and to request their help in distributing self-administered pencil-and-paper questionnaires for anonymous completion by their second-year students. The response rate among the teachers was high: of the 30

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<sup>6</sup> The vast majority of HSE second-years attend English language classes, so there is a fairly close fit between the target population and survey population; excluded are students who already speak English so well that they are not required to attend classes and students who missed lessons on the days the questionnaires were distributed.

teachers approached, just four were unwilling to participate. With help from the sampled teachers it proved possible to achieve a response rate of 100 per cent among the students invited to take part. Students were asked to fill in the questionnaires during class time at the start or end of one of their English lessons. In most cases the researcher oversaw the process in person, but in some cases administration of the questionnaires was overseen by the class teacher. No instances of individual students refusing to complete the questionnaire were recorded. In total, 452 anonymous survey questionnaires were returned from the HSE. This number is estimated to represent roughly 15% of HSE's second-year population.<sup>7</sup>

The sample is not perfectly representative of the HSE's entire second-year undergraduate population, as there were several degree programmes from which students did not participate.<sup>8</sup> It should also be noted that the number of completed questionnaires per degree programme is not proportional to the number of students enrolled per degree programme (nor have the responses been weighted to make up for this, as the necessary information about the target population is not available). There is an imbalance in the gender of the respondents, with 35 per cent being male and 65 per cent female (the gender balance within the target population is unknown). However, the chosen sampling method did allow a relatively large number of responses to be gathered within very tight time and budget constraints, while avoiding bias from non-response or self-selection (the former problem would likely affect questionnaires administered outside class time; the latter problem is a risk in focus groups and interviews when participants are volunteers who respond to adverts). The anonymous, self-administered nature of the survey is advantageous in light of the contentious subject matter. In the febrile

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<sup>7</sup> A precise total for the number of second-year students was not available, but HSE intake is estimated at roughly 3,000 undergraduates per year.

<sup>8</sup> The degree programmes represented (with number of survey respondents) are: Advertising (10); Applied Maths and Cybernetics (41); Business Informatics (13); Cultural Studies (10); Economics (34); History (28); Journalism (31); Law (43); Management (38); Maths (23); Oriental Studies (3); Philosophy (41); Politics (10); Psychology (46); Sociology (36); Software Engineering (8); State and Municipal Administration (37). Programmes omitted are Philology, Design, Linguistics, Logistics, International Relations, Global Economics, as well as two special BA programmes – one offered by HSE's International College of Economics and Finance (ICEF) and one offered by the HSE in conjunction with the New Economic School. The reasons for omitting these programmes varied – either they run English classes independently from the three main English language faculties which gave permission to run the survey, or individual teachers declined to participate.

political climate of Russia in 2014, some students may have been uncomfortable expressing their political views openly to an interviewer.

The survey questionnaire had three sections. The first asked for basic socio-demographic information.<sup>9</sup> Questions in the third section focused predominantly on habits of media consumption, asking respondents to state how regularly they accessed news about other countries and international affairs, the sources they had used more than once in the past month (from a list of 60), as well as how regularly they watched Western movies and TV programmes. There were also questions about how much time respondents had spent in Western countries and how frequently they interacted with friends or acquaintances from Western countries. The middle section of the questionnaire comprised a series of statements about the West, to which respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement. The response options were ‘completely agree’ (*‘polnostyu soglasen’*), ‘rather agree’ (*‘skoreye soglasen’*), ‘rather disagree’ (*‘skoreye ne soglasen’*), ‘completely disagree’ (*‘polnostyu ne soglasen’*), or ‘hard to say’ (*‘zatrudnyayus otvetit’*). Unlike many typical public opinion surveys which use generic questions to gauge geopolitical sentiments (what is your attitude towards this or that country or organization, which of the following countries do you consider a threat, which foreign policy option do you prefer, etc.),<sup>10</sup> the statements about the West in this survey were constructed from claims made repeatedly by Russian state television (in the *Vesti Nedeli* news programme) and political leaders (President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov) in the months preceding the survey.<sup>11</sup> They can be considered elements of Russia’s ‘strategic narrative’ (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin & Roselle 2013; Szostek 2016b), via which the state projects characterizations of

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<sup>9</sup> Age, gender, the region of Russia and type of settlement where the respondent had spent most of his/her life, accommodation circumstances, whether the respondent considered themselves ethnically Russian, and whether the respondent considered the educational level and financial position of their family to be average, below or above average.

<sup>10</sup> For examples, see White & McAllister (2008); White, Korosteleva & Allison (2006); Allison, Light & White (2006); and O’Loughlin (2001).

<sup>11</sup> To identify these recurring claims about the West, the researcher qualitatively analysed all 41 official statements made by Putin and Lavrov in June and July 2014 (from the transcript archives on kremlin.ru and mid.ru), as well as nine episodes of *Vesti Nedeli* from the same period (a popular 90-minute news and analysis programme, broadcast each Sunday evening on state channel *Rossiya 1*, archived on YouTube). The texts were coded using the CAQDAS tool Atlas.ti.

itself and other international actors with political goals in mind. Statements were keyed both positively and negatively to avoid acquiescence bias.

### *Analysis*

For the purpose of analysis an aggregated Likert scale was constructed from responses to 11 statements about the West, listed in **Table 1** below.<sup>12</sup> For each item, complete agreement with the state's official narrative about the West was coded -2, 'rather' agreement was coded -1, 'rather' disagreement was coded 1 and complete disagreement was coded 2. 'Hard to say' was coded as a non-response, effectively as 0. For each respondent, the coded responses to the 11 Likert items were summed, producing an aggregated Likert scale ranging from -22 (indicating the strongest agreement with the official narrative about the West), to +22 (indicating the strongest disagreement with the official narrative). The mean score was -4.62, with a standard deviation of 8.50. The scale had a high reliability, with a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of 0.88.<sup>13</sup> Because the distribution of scores was skewed to the right, a square root transformation was applied for the OLS regression analysis (after adding a constant of 23) to produce a normally distributed outcome variable.

**Table 1: Survey items (claims about the West) used to produce aggregated Likert scale, with distribution of responses**

	Completely agree	Rather agree	Rather disagree	Completely disagree	Hard to say/NA
The West regularly ignores norms of international law and violates the sovereignty of various countries	10%	37%	33%	10%	10%
In recent years the USA has committed war crimes and violated human rights much more than other countries	35%	35%	13%	5%	11%
Western countries have long exhibited double standards: their condemnation or endorsement of political forces abroad is determined by geopolitical interests, not morals	35%	42%	9%	3%	12%
Gross interference by the West in the internal affairs of other countries is one of the main causes of global instability	15%	33%	25%	12%	16%

<sup>12</sup> As defined by Vogel & Wänke (2016, p 61), a Likert scale is 'a multi-item attitude scale that consists of several evaluative statements about an object or issue. Respondents are asked to express their degree of agreement with each statement along a numerical response scale'.

<sup>13</sup> Cronbach's alpha is a popular coefficient of reliability based on the intercorrelations of items (Vogel & Wänke 2016, p 23); the formula can be found in Field et al. (2012, p 761).

Western countries have long exhibited double standards: they condemn Russia for its behaviour but themselves behave worse	18%	37%	19%	10%	16%
Governments of Western countries are making huge efforts to discredit Russia and distort Russia's image	27%	35%	16%	7%	15%
A new world order is forming in which Russia's position is strengthening and the West can no longer dominate	9%	25%	35%	12%	19%
The world has recently been becoming more multipolar, but the West is resisting this process	14%	33%	20%	8%	25%
Russia and the EU are natural economic partners but the USA tries to prevent them joining forces	15%	40%	20%	6%	20%
Leading Western media are propaganda instruments for Western governments	31%	37%	14%	5%	13%
For centuries the West has strived to restrain and weaken Russia, opposing Russian influence in the world	22%	42%	17%	8%	11%

The main predictors of theoretical interest are dummy variables created from the question asking which news sources respondents had used more than once in the previous month to obtain news about other countries and international affairs. Responses were indicated by circling any number of 60 media options in a table.<sup>14</sup> On average, the students circled seven to eight different source options (median 7, mean 7.5, ranging from a minimum of 0 to a maximum of 33).<sup>15</sup> The social network VK.com was the most used source (64 per cent of respondents), followed by lenta.ru (52 per cent), *Pervyy Kanal* (50 per cent), ria.ru (42 per cent) and Yandex (42 per cent). The first dummy variable distinguishes between students who reported using at least one of Russia's main 'state-aligned' news sources,<sup>16</sup> and those who did not. The second dummy variable distinguishes between students who reported using at least one news source which regularly relays content that is out of sync with the

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<sup>14</sup> The table of 60 was compiled on the basis of Rambler's Top100 ranking of 'News and media' available at <http://top100.rambler.ru/navi/?theme=440> (last accessed 31 August 2014) and by conferring with local media experts. It was checked during a pilot of the survey questionnaire.

<sup>15</sup> Some of the source options were residual categories ('other Russian TV channel', 'other foreign website', and so on), so the stated averages may underestimate the true number of sources used.

<sup>16</sup> These are the TV channels *Pervyi Kanal*, *Rossiya 1*, *Rossiya 24*, *NTV*; the website/news agency ria.ru, the newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, the radio stations *Mayak*, *Vesti FM* and *Radio Rossiya*; the newspapers *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Izvestiya* and the TV station *Life News* were also treated as state-aligned by virtue of their very loyal relationship to the Kremlin.

Russian state authorities' perspective on events.<sup>17</sup> For want of a better term, these news sources will be called 'alternative'.<sup>18</sup> Among the 452 survey respondents, 78 per cent reported using at least one 'state-aligned' source and 53 per cent reported using at least one 'alternative' source.

Boxplots give an immediate visual impression of how the dummy variables relating to media use affect support for the Russian state's narrative of global politics when no other variables are controlled.<sup>19</sup> **Figure 1** illustrates the clear difference between users and non-users of the main 'state-aligned' news sources: the non-users have a median score of -1 on the untransformed aggregated scale, which is six points higher than the users (median -7), indicating a lower level of agreement with the negative statements about the West. However, Figure 2 illustrates a much weaker association between use and non-use of the so-called 'alternative' news sources: users have a median score of -5, which is only a single point higher than the median for non-users (-6).

**Figure 3** provides an additional visualisation of the effect of using the 'alternative' news sources. Here, one can see scores for students who used the state-aligned news sources but *not* the 'alternative' sources ( $n = 164$ , median -7); students who used the 'alternative' sources but *not* the state-aligned sources ( $n = 50$ ; median 3.5); students who used *both* the 'state-aligned' sources *and* the 'alternative' news sources ( $n = 191$ , median -6); and students who used *neither* the state-aligned *nor* the 'alternative' sources ( $n = 47$ ; median -2). Only the group that used the 'alternative' media' without using the state-aligned sources disagreed more than agreed with the state's

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<sup>17</sup> These are the internet-based TV channel *Dozhd*, the radio station *Ekho Moskvy*, the websites slon.ru, snob.ru, grani.ru, and BBC Russian, and the newspapers *Vedomosti* and *Novaya Gazeta*.

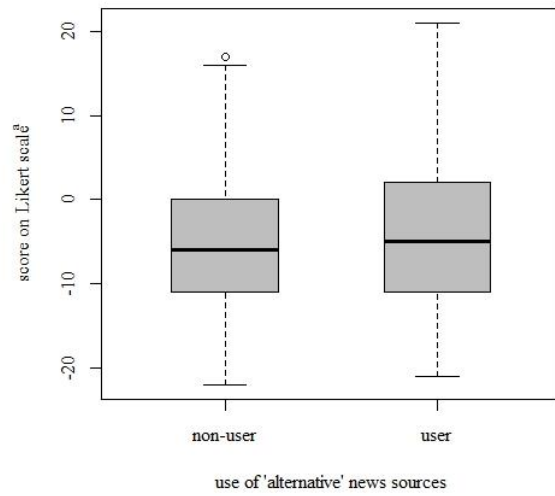
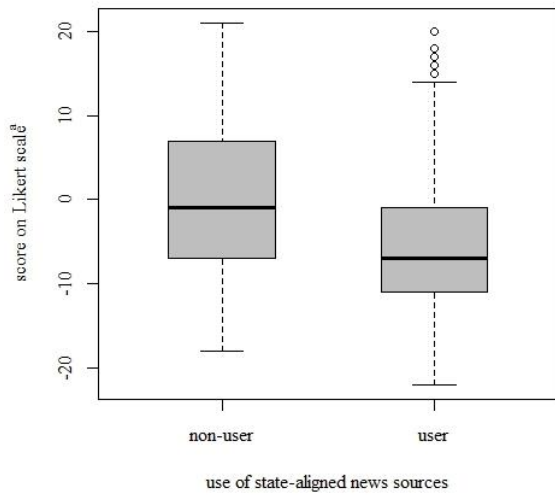
<sup>18</sup> Categorizing sources by their editorial policy is not straightforward and there is a degree of subjective judgement involved in identifying 'alternative' sources. Sources which are not owned by the Russian state or state-aligned organizations vary considerably. Some have no coordinated editorial policy by virtue of their nature (the web portals and social networks), some generally avoid political commentary (e.g. *Euronews*, *RBK*), some regularly invite political commentary from the full spectrum of opinion (*Dozhd*, *Ekho Moskvy*), some actively favour an opposition point of view (slon.ru, *Novaya Gazeta*) or carry analysis that is critical at times but not outspokenly so (snob.ru and *Vedomosti*).

<sup>19</sup> Boxplots display the median at the centre of the plot. The top and bottom of the 'box' represent the interquartile range (the middle 50 per cent of observations). The 'whiskers' extending from the box extend to one-and-a-half times the interquartile range, or to the maximum/minimum values, if the latter fall within one-and-a-half times the interquartile range. See Field et al (2012, p 128).

anti-Western narrative overall. Students who used both state-aligned and ‘alternative’ sources in combination agreed with the state’s anti-Western narrative almost as strongly as those who used only the state-aligned sources.

**Figure 1: Boxplot showing range, quartiles and median of scores on the aggregated Likert scale for users and non-users of state-aligned news sources**

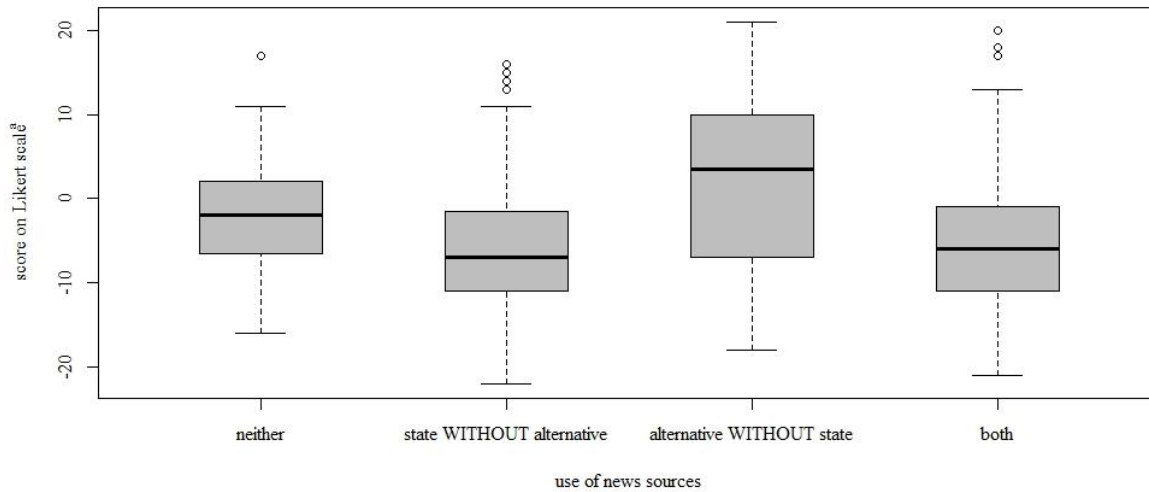
**Figure 2: Boxplot showing range, quartiles and median of scores on the aggregated Likert scale for users and non-users of ‘alternative’ news sources**



<sup>a</sup>Lower scores indicate stronger agreement with state’s narrative about the West



**Figure 3: Boxplot showing range, quartiles and median of scores on the aggregated Likert scale for groups using different combinations of ‘state-aligned’ and ‘alternative’ news sources**



<sup>a</sup>Lower scores indicate stronger agreement with state’s narrative about the West

Multiple regression allows other variables to be included in the analysis as predictors or controls. There are dummy variables for whether the respondent was male or female; had spent most of their life in or outside Moscow; considered themselves Russian (*‘russkii’*) or non-Russian (*‘ne russkii’*);<sup>20</sup> considered their family’s wealth above average or not; considered their family’s education level above average or not; and checked news at least once a day or not. There are also three categorical variables reflecting how often respondents watched films or TV programmes from Western countries (occasionally, quite often, very often, against a reference category of rarely or never); how often they interacted with friends or acquaintances from Western countries (occasionally, quite often, very often, against a reference category of rarely or never); and how much time approximately they had spent in Western countries (less than a month, one to five months, six to 12 months and over 12 months, against a reference category of none). **Table 2** presents descriptive statistics relating to all the variables used in the regression models.

<sup>20</sup> The term *russkii* implies Russian in an ethnic sense, rather than citizenship.

**Table 2: Details and distributions of categorical variables used in the Models 1–3**

Uses main ‘state-aligned’ media (dummy variable constructed from a question with multiple possible responses; ‘yes’ if student reported using any one or more of <i>Pervyi Kanal, Rossiya 1, Rossiya 24, NTV; ria.ru, Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Mayak, Vesti FM, Radio Rossiya, Komsomolskaya Pravda, Izvestiya</i> or <i>Life News</i> )	Yes (uses): 355 No (does not use): 97
Uses ‘alternative’ media (dummy variable constructed from a question with multiple possible responses; ‘yes’ if student reported using any one or more of <i>Dozhd, Ekho Moskv, slon.ru, snob.ru, grani.ru, BBC Russian, Vedomosti</i> or <i>Novaya Gazeta</i> )	Yes (uses): 241 No (does not use): 211
Does not check news every day (dummy variable constructed from a question with multiple possible responses; ‘yes’ if student reported checking news only a few times per week or less)	Yes (checks news less than once a day): 197 No (checks news at least once a day): 252 (NA = 3)
Watches movies/TV shows from the West	‘Very often (for example, daily)’: 140 ‘Rather often (for example, weekly)’: 177 ‘From time to time (for example, monthly)’: 102 ‘Rarely or never’: 29 (NA = 4)
Interacts with friends, colleagues or acquaintances from Western countries	‘Very often (for example, daily)’: 36 ‘Rather often (for example, weekly)’: 82 ‘From time to time (for example, monthly)’: 159 ‘Rarely or never’: 169 (NA = 6)
Has personally spent in Western countries...	‘More than one year’: 54 ‘Six to 12 months’: 53 ‘One to five months’: 141 ‘Less than a month’: 112 ‘Never been there’: 82 (NA = 10)
Most of life spent outside Moscow (dummy variable constructed from question with several possible responses; ‘no’ if student reported spending majority of their life so far in Moscow)	Yes: 195 No: 256 (NA = 1)
Considers self Russian (‘ <i>russkim</i> ’)	Yes: 394 No: 53 (NA = 5)
Family wealth above average (dummy variable constructed from multiple choice question; ‘yes’ if student responded ‘above average’ to question about ‘family’s financial position, by Russian standards’)	Yes: 103 No: 343 (NA = 6)
Family education level above average (dummy variable constructed from multiple choice question; ‘yes’ if student responded ‘above average’ to question about ‘family’s level of education, by Russian standards’)	Yes: 301 No: 151
Is male (dummy variable constructed from question about gender)	Yes: 156 No: 295 (NA = 1)



from time to time	0.12		
quite often	-0.16		
very often	0.13		
Total time spent in Western countries... (ref.: none)			
less than a month	0.03		
1 to 5 months	0.26†		
6 to 12 months	0.22		
Over 12 months	0.38†		
Most of life spent outside Moscow	-0.16		
Does not consider self Russian (' <i>russkim</i> ')	0.36*	0.37**	0.36*
Family wealth above average	-0.18		
Family education level above average	0.02		
Is male	0.07		
INTERACTION: uses state-aligned * not every day			0.42†
INTERACTION: uses 'alternative' * not every day			-0.20
Constant	3.65	3.81	3.95
$R^2$	0.17	0.14	0.15
Adjusted $R^2$	0.13	0.12	0.13

\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ , † $p < 0.10$

<sup>a</sup> The number of observations is 452. Cells contain unstandardized Ordinary Least Squares regression coefficients, with standard errors in square brackets. Estimates are based on a square-root transformation of the outcome variable (outcome variable is the Likert scale of agreement with the Russian state's narrative about the West, where lower scores indicate greater agreement). Non-multicollinearity of predictors was checked using variance inflation factor (VIF) values; homoscedasticity of errors was checked by plotting predicted values against standardized residuals.

Effect size is hard to gauge directly from the regression coefficients in Table 3 due to the square-root transformation of the outcome variable. It is therefore helpful to consider some predicted values. Under Model 2, if all other predictors are set at their mode ('alternative' sources are used, news is checked every day, movies/TV shows from the West are watched quite often and self-identification is Russian), a user of state-aligned media has an expected score on the original aggregated Likert scale of -7.87, whereas a non-user of state-aligned media has an expected score of -2.84. Thus, the effect of *not* using state-aligned media is roughly equivalent to 'rather agreeing' instead of 'strongly agreeing' (or finding it 'hard to say', instead of 'rather agreeing') to five of the negative claims about the West. It is noteworthy that even a non-user of state-aligned

media is expected under Model 2 to have an expected score below zero, i.e. someone who does not use the main state-aligned media is still expected, on balance, to agree more than disagree with the state's narrative about the West. If 'alternative' sources are *not* used but all other predictors are set at their mode, Model 2 predicts a score of -9.31, which is less than two scale-points lower than the predicted value (*ceteris paribus*) for someone who *does* use alternative sources. Model 3 predicts a score of -7.79 when all predictors are set to their mode, which rises slightly to -5.19 if news is not checked every day (*ceteris paribus*). It predicts a score of -0.91 for a non-user of state-aligned media (all other variables set to their mode), which is almost 7 scale-points higher (i.e. less agreement with the state's narrative) than for users of state-aligned media.

For all the models,  $R^2$  values below 0.20 reflect the fact that a large proportion of the observed variation in the students' responses remains unaccounted for. It must thus be acknowledged that geographical imaginations are shaped by many forces which the survey could not capture, including family and peer groups.

### *Conclusion*

The above analysis demonstrates that a relationship does exist between use of state-aligned ('pro-Kremlin') news sources and support for the Russian authorities' negative narrative about the West, at least among the 452 students who took part in the present study. In this respect, the findings are compatible with the frequently made assertion that anti-Western messages in state-controlled media explain anti-Western sentiments in Russia. However, it is important to emphasise that the direction of influence between media consumption and geographical imaginations is *not* established by this study. Respondents may have avoided the main state-aligned news sources due to a certain resistance to the state's narrative; or they may have developed a certain resistance to the state's narrative due to their avoidance of the main state-aligned news sources (it is likely the influence works both ways). The findings are also significant for showing that some of the Russian state's negative claims about the West resonate even among citizens who do not get news from the main state-aligned news sources. For example, both users and non-users of state-aligned media were inclined to agree more often than disagree that Western media are 'propaganda instruments' of Western governments and that the West has tried to weaken and constrain Russia for centuries (this being among a group of urban, internet-connected, bilingual young people at one of Russia's leading and most internationally-oriented universities). Direct exposure to the main state-aligned news sources, on its own, is therefore only a *partial* explanation of disapproval of the West and the resonance of the official narrative in Russia. A challenge for the future is to understand how certain elements of a state's narrative of foreign affairs can become so hegemonic that they are

‘common sense’ even among people who avoid state-aligned news sources (it may be helpful in this regard to consider the role of artefacts of popular culture such as movies, books, games and other non-news media that have traditionally concerned scholars of popular geopolitics).

Using one or more ‘alternative’ news source was associated with only a small reduction in agreement with the state authorities’ narrative about the West. Most survey respondents got news from a range of sources and a majority of them reported using at least one source that was either foreign-owned (BBC Russian, *Vedomosti*) or known for carrying diverse viewpoints, sometimes critical of the state (*Novaya Gazeta*, *Ekho Moskvy*, slon.ru, snob.ru, grani.ru, *Dozhd*). One might have expected these sources to generate a ‘credibility gap’ and scepticism among their users about the Kremlin’s interpretation of international politics. However, it appears that many elements of the state’s narrative of international politics are able to retain credibility even among Russians who engage with contradictory perspectives. This finding casts some doubt on the likely effectiveness of Western governments funding Russian-language media outlets that aim to ‘counter Kremlin propaganda’ within Russia with pro-Western messages.

Among the Russian population as a whole, television is still the ‘main’ news source for roughly 90 per cent of citizens; just 5 per cent of Russians get news from the internet without using television as well (Volkov & Goncharov 2014). The HSE students are quite distinctive in that almost a third of them reported using no state TV channels at all to follow the news. Studying this unusual cohort has shown that ‘tuning out’ of state broadcasters and other state-aligned news media is a significant act for geographical imaginations in Russia: it predicts more ‘moderate’ (if not favourable) views of the West better than most other factors, including ‘tuning in’ to ‘alternative’ news sources. With regard to theory and the popular geopolitics literature, this article therefore suggests that the agency, habits and choices of individual media consumers would be a worthwhile avenue for further investigation. Even in authoritarian states like Russia, internet access offers citizens a multitude of options for following the news and building a personal understanding of the world. If most Russians are continuing in the age of digital media pluralism to stick with ‘propagandistic’ TV channels and their anti-Western narratives, this is something to be studied and explained, not taken as given.

It would, however, be unwise to draw very firm inferences from this small case study to broader swathes of the Russian population given the limitations of the research design. The survey respondents are clearly atypical Russians in many respects and the sample, while randomly selected, may not be perfectly representative even with respect to the HSE student body. More research, using bigger and better samples, would be needed to

establish the generalizability of the relationships found here. Another limitation is the crude measures used here to map habits of media consumption. The ‘state-aligned’ and ‘alternative’ news media categories could be questioned or compiled differently, as could the table of 60 options on which respondents identified the sources they used (which relied on accurate recall). Unfortunately, the survey did not reveal how regularly or intensively respondents used each source – the students were only asked whether they had used a source more than once in the past month, not how frequently they had used it. If the relative frequency of using state and ‘alternative’ sources could be tracked and taken into consideration, different results might be achieved. Habits of media consumption are multifaceted, difficult to monitor and even more difficult to represent accurately in a quantitative dataset. Yet if nothing else, this study suggests it is wrong to exclude them (as has happened in the past) from analyses explaining geopolitical imaginations, orientations or foreign policy preferences among citizens in post-Soviet states.

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