Article

Priming for War: Ukraine in Russian Domestic Television News, 2009–2019

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Abstract

This study investigates Russian television coverage of Ukraine between 2009 and 2019, drawing on a dataset of over 2.3 million news episodes from eight major television networks and one news agency (Interfax), including both state-controlled and relatively independent outlets. Combining natural language processing techniques with a quasi-experimental design, the analysis traces changes in content patterns over time. The results provide strong evidence consistent with the first hypothesis: following a state-enforced management change at RBC TV in 2016, the network increased the share of news coverage primarily focused on Ukraine by up to 40 percent, depending on the assumed treatment date. Evidence for the second hypothesis—which posits that RBC's reporting would become more similar to state-controlled outlets—remains only partial. Cosine similarity analysis shows that RBC's content became more similar to several state-controlled outlets while diverging from relatively independent TV Rain (Dozhd). Sentiment-polarity analysis indicates that RBC's coverage became modestly more negative after the takeover. These findings suggest that content changes following institutional intervention may reflect increased alignment with state-linked narratives while preserving outlet-specific variation. The study contributes to research on media alignment in autocratic contexts by analyzing a single-case pattern and highlights both the potential and limitations of computational text analysis in examining large-scale trends in state media coverage.

Keywords

Russia, Ukraine, television, agenda-setting, news

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Introduction

This article offers a large-scale empirical analysis of how Russian state-controlled television increased the prominence of Ukraine-related coverage for domestic audiences in the years preceding the full-scale war. While scholars have long acknowledged the agenda-setting power of mass media in authoritarian contexts (Alrababa'h and Blaydes 2021; King et al. 2017), systematic theorizing and empirical evaluation of how autocratic regimes use media to prepare for external conflict remain limited. Drawing on a dataset of more than two million news episodes broadcast in Russia between 2009 and 2019—a period of near-total state control of mass media and high public trust in these outlets (Levada-Center 2017; 2019b; 2020; 2021)—this article examines patterns in the frequency and character of Ukraine-related coverage without making causal claims about effects on public opinion.

This study tests two hypotheses. The first posits that the Russian regime induced an increase in Ukraine-related coverage on state-aligned television during a period of escalating geopolitical tension. The second holds that when relatively independent outlets come under state control, their reporting becomes more similar to that of fully state-controlled media. The analysis provides strong support for the first hypothesis: RBC's share of Ukraine-related coverage increased markedly after the 2016 state intervention. Evidence for the second is more limited, indicating only a partial increase in similarity in content and tone.

This article contributes to scholarship on autocratic media control and resilience by examining foreign news coverage on Russian state-controlled television. While research on autocratic resilience often addresses media agenda-setting (King et al. 2017; Lu and Pan 2021), systematic analysis of foreign news management in authoritarian domestic media remains limited (but see Shestopalova 2024). Media studies, conversely, tend to focus on foreign news in democratic contexts (e.g., Entman 1991; Herman and Chomsky 2010; Kellner 2019; Pedelty 1995), with little attention to autocracies engaged in external conflict. Despite television's continued dominance in many authoritarian regimes (Pan et al. 2020), studies of broadcast agenda-setting remain rare, warranting further theoretical and empirical attention.

Although scholarship on Russian media is growing, domestic strategies of mass-media manipulation remain relatively understudied. Much empirical research has focused on public opinion dynamics (La Lova 2023) or Russia's international information campaigns (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2021), while systematic analyses of domestic propaganda and censorship are less common. Fredheim (2017) provides rare large-scale quantitative evidence, showing that appointing loyal editors in major Russian online outlets coincides with sharp reductions in coverage of controversial legal, business, and political topics. While existing studies often focus on isolated topics or discrete events, broader longitudinal analyses of domestic television's agenda-setting and enmification strategies are only beginning to emerge (Hutchings and Tolz 2015; La Lova 2024; Lankina and Watanabe 2017; Shestopalova 2024). Leveraging a dataset of more than two million news episodes from major outlets, this study helps fill that gap.

Examining case studies from autocracies is critical for understanding how domestic media are used not only to control information but only to construct foreign policy narratives that reinforce regime legitimacy. While much of the literature on media and international crises focuses on democracies and *rally-'round-the-flag effects* (Baum and Groeling 2009; Oneal and Bryan 1995), these models assume competitive media systems and do not translate easily to authoritarian settings. Yet, autocratic regimes with state-controlled media deploy distinct agenda-setting mechanisms, particularly *diversionary threat* rhetoric. A prominent example comes from Syria: Alrababa'h and Blaydes (2021) show that state media strategically shifted portrayals of foreign threats to deflect attention from internal unrest and bolster regime authority. This line of research remains rare but essential, showing how foreign policy discourse in autocracies can serve domestic goals.

This study combines natural language processing (NLP) techniques with a quasi-experimental research design. Each news story is labeled with a country-topic using a semi-supervised machine learning algorithm, forming the basis for hypothesis testing. The first hypothesis is tested using a difference-in-differences approach, with the 2016 state-enforced management change at RBC TV as the treatment and reports from the relatively independent Interfax as a control. The analysis shows a significant increase in RBC's coverage of Ukraine-related topics following the intervention. The second hypothesis is assessed by comparing text similarity and sentiment measures across outlets over time. Additional descriptive analysis reveals a post-2016 rise in RBC reports portraying Ukraine as unstable or violent—especially in the theme labeled "Disorder in Ukraine"—suggesting that autocratic media may emphasize instability narratives when targeting domestic audiences.

This article contributes to existing scholarship by providing large-scale empirical evidence of warfare-related agenda-setting on Russian domestic television, addressing underexplored aspects of autocratic media control and conflict communication. It also employs an advanced *Text-as-Data* approach that uses machine learning to analyze foreign news patterns without extensive human coding. This scalable methodology can be applied across languages and media formats, complementing prior research.

Russia Between 2009 and 2019

To motivate the empirical design that follows, I first summarize the political setting and media system conditions relevant to *H1* and *H2*.

Russia's military intervention in Ukraine, officially framed as support for anti-government and separatist groups within the country, began with the Crimean crisis in February 2014 and escalated into armed conflict in the Donbas.[1] Opinion polls indicate that the 2014 Crimea annexation was highly popular among Russian citizens (Levada-Center 2019a; Hale 2018, 2022). Nearly half of respondents in a nationally representative survey expressed pride in Crimea becoming part of the Russian Federation. Among Russian respondents, trust in the national army increased, as did the perception of Russia as a global power (Levada-Center 2019a). Following February 2014, the President's previously declining approval ratings in Russia experienced a

short-term surge (Russian Public Opinion Research Center 2020). Importantly, these changes in public sentiment were unlikely to be the result of domestic improvements. Western sanctions, combined with plummeting oil prices, pushed the Russian economy into a recession. The subsequent decline in living standards was evident in the rise of the Consumer Price Index and a decrease in the RTS (Russia Trading System) Index (Moscow Exchange 2022; Russian Federal State Statistics Service 2022). Many scholars link these public opinion trends to the dominance of state-controlled television (Hale 2018). In this context, the institutional design of Russian television may help explain how agenda-setting shaped what citizens encountered in daily news.

The Role of State-Controlled Television

Between 2009 and 2019, Russian television operated in a tightly managed media ecosystem shaped by formal and informal mechanisms of state control. The state directly owned major national channels and maintained indirect influence through government-affiliated entities, municipalities, the Church, and the military. Despite the growing availability of internet access, television remained the dominant source of news in Russia: as late as 2019, more than half of Russians did not use the internet daily, 70 percent spoke only Russian, and just 11 percent—mostly younger citizens—spoke English (Levada-Center 2014, 2018, 2020). A state-sponsored telecommunications program guaranteed free access to digital television, further reinforcing its centrality in public life.

In this context, the Presidential Administration orchestrated news management across national broadcasters. Control was exercised through weekly editorial instructions (*temniki*), the appointment of Kremlin-aligned curators to supervise television channels, and constant monitoring of public opinion to calibrate messaging (Greene and Robertson 2019: 39–41, 113; Sharafutdinova 2020: 136; Zygar 2016: 188). Journalists often engaged in anticipatory compliance, adjusting coverage to match state preferences without needing explicit directives (Schimpfossl and Yablokov 2014). Certain individuals were placed on informal "do-not-cover" lists, and entire topics could be emphasized or suppressed based on regime priorities (Zygar 2016: 188, 407). While this system preserved the façade of editorial independence, it effectively ensured ideological coordination across outlets. As Lipman et al. (2018) argue, the result was a form of "managed media" that avoided overt censorship but fostered loyalty through structural alignment and self-discipline. Table 1 situates the subsequent analysis by showing which channels Russian respondents reported watching and which are represented in the data.

With this institutional structure in view, I next summarize the dominant narratives that circulated on state television.

The Propaganda Narrative

State television constructed a reality distinct from what most Western audiences encountered (Greene and Robertson 2019: 206–07; Guriev and Treisman 2022: 249).

Table 1. Most Popular Television Channels in Russia, 2009–2019.

Television channel	2009 (%)	2014 (%)	2019 (%)	State-controlled	Transcripts are in the data set
Channel One (Perviy Kanal)	78	82	47	Yes	Yes
Russia-1	68	71	48	Yes	Yes
NTV	54	48	36	Yes	Yes
Russia-24	n/a	30	31	Yes	No
Channel Five	10	19	17	Yes	Yes
Ren-TV	n/a	18	13	Yes	No
Local Channels	15	13	n/a	n/a	No
TVC	10	12	9	Yes	Yes
Kultura	12	11	5	Yes	No
Zvezda	n/a	n/a	12	Yes	Yes
TV Rain (Dozhd)	n/a	2	1	No	Yes
RBC TV	n/a	5	4	From mid-2016	Yes

Note. The year columns are constructed based on Levada-Center (2017, 2019b). The respondents were asked, "Do you watch television news? If yes, which television channels do you watch regularly?" Percentages (2009, 2014, 2019) reflect the share of respondents who, after saying they watch TV news, named each channel they watch regularly. The column "State-controlled" is based on publicly available information. n/a indicates that data for that channel are not available for that year; in the "State-controlled" column, n/a indicates that the category ("Local channels") includes outlets with mixed ownership, so a single classification as state-controlled is not applicable.

In this manufactured narrative, Russia was perpetually under threat from foreign adversaries (Shestopalova 2024). The liberal West was depicted as morally decaying and plagued by social and natural disasters. In contrast, Russian science, education, and the military were portrayed as thriving. Vladimir Putin's leadership was presented as just and inevitable, while dissent was equated with a lack of patriotism. Crimea's annexation was framed in overwhelmingly positive terms (Greene and Robertson 2019; Hale 2022; Sharafutdinova 2020).

The literature suggests that media coverage of Ukraine centered on emotions such as anger, betrayal, national pride, and a sense of "reawakening" (Theiler 2018). The iconic phrase "Russia rises from its knees," symbolizing revenge against the West, was frequently repeated. News stories fixated on political developments in Kyiv and Crimea and the armed conflicts in Donetsk and Luhansk, with coverage characterized by one-sided sentiment. Ukraine was portrayed as a neo-fascist puppet of the West, a threat to Russia, and an oppressor of Russian-speaking citizens (Shestopalova 2024).

RBC and Interfax

Two media outlets anchor the empirical analyses: RBC—the intervention-exposed outlet—and Interfax—the untreated comparator. These outlets provide the design basis for the difference-in-differences analysis (H1) and the alignment tests (H2).

Before 2016, RBC, a media group launched in partnership with CNBC and CNN, was relatively independent from state control. Known for its focus on business news, RBC published several investigative reports on Putin's family, the Panama Papers, and financial dealings of the Russian Orthodox Church. In May 2016, following government pressure, RBC's management was dismissed (Seddon 2016). This intervention triggered mass resignations among RBC journalists.

Unlike Dozhd (TV Rain)—a relatively independent channel that, following sustained state pressure, was forced into online-only broadcasting (Guriev and Treisman 2022: 183; Paskhalis et al. 2022)—RBC continued to operate on national television. Subsequently, RBC was sold to oligarch Grigory Berezkin, who maintained close ties to the Kremlin (Reiter and Lyrchikova 2016). Despite changes in ownership and editorial leadership, RBC remained available on satellite television without a subscription.

During this period, Interfax, a major private news agency, operated with more editorial freedom than state-run counterparts like TASS and RIA (Watanabe 2017). With offices in Russia, Ukraine, and other former Soviet states, Interfax provided news services to businesses, media outlets, and governments. Its financial independence afforded it a degree of insulation from state interference. Although not entirely free from state influence, Interfax occasionally covered politically sensitive topics, including anti-regime protests and opposition leader Alexey Navalny's activism. While conformity to state narratives is widespread on Russian television (Greene and Robertson 2019; Paskhalis et al. 2022; Sharafutdinova 2020; Zygar 2016), RBC's partial independence prior to 2016 makes it an analytically valuable case: its post-takeover shift illustrates how editorial alignment can unfold within mainstream media even in the absence of direct censorship.

Theoretical Background

The analysis is guided by two hypotheses:

> **H1:** In anticipation of a potential war of aggression, the Russian regime induced the mass media to increase the visibility of the targeted foreign state in domestic news coverage.
>
> **H2:** When a relatively independent outlet comes under state control, its coverage of the targeted foreign state becomes more similar (aligned) to that of state-controlled outlets.

The logic behind *H1* draws on established theories of media power in authoritarian contexts, where leaders use agenda-setting and securitization strategies to portray foreign actors as existential threats (Adler 1997; Buzan et al. 1998; Wendt 1992). In this context, increasing the volume of media reporting about a targeted foreign state serves not only to disseminate specific frames but also to raise the overall salience of that state in the public consciousness. By flooding the media environment with stories that depict the foreign actor as threatening or unstable, the regime elevates the perceived

urgency of the issue. Such "enmification" is central to the political preparation for conflict, as it cultivates public concern and builds legitimacy for coercive action. In non-pluralistic systems like Russia's, control over the volume and tone of media reporting becomes a key tool of anticipatory conflict strategy.

One key mechanism behind this process is the regime's ability to leverage agenda-setting power to amplify the visibility of a foreign actor (Gilboa 2008), while restricting alternative interpretations. When access to independent or international sources is limited, domestic audiences become more susceptible to narratives portraying the target state as dangerous. By significantly increasing reporting—through sustained media saturation—the regime may drive public attention toward the foreign threat. This media overexposure may contribute not just to public awareness but also to emotional engagement and political alignment with the regime's framing. As a result, military action can later be presented as an inevitable or justified response to a threat that the media itself has made appear constant and pressing.

The effectiveness of this anticipatory strategy is reinforced by deeper social and psychological mechanisms. Social identity theory (Coser 1956; Tajfel 1970) suggests that repeated exposure to threat narratives heightens in-group loyalty and sharpens out-group hostility. Authoritarian regimes use this dynamic to consolidate internal cohesion by portraying the targeted foreign state as an aggressor or moral violator. Framing theory (Entman 1991; Gamson and Modigliani 1989) shows how exposure to consistently negative portrayals builds lasting enemy images. The propaganda model (Herman and Chomsky 2010) and agenda-setting research (McCombs and Shaw 1972) both emphasize how volume and repetition—not just content—shape public perceptions of importance and legitimacy. Especially in conflict-prone contexts, increased media attention to an external actor primes the public to interpret future escalation as necessary. Moreover, as Oppenheimer (2006) notes, enemy images embedded in cultural narratives and social memory can be easily reactivated by this heightened reporting, allowing regimes to mobilize support for aggression more effectively.

Hypothesis 2 is grounded in research on how authoritarian regimes capture media institutions and align their output with state narratives. Fredheim (2017) demonstrates that editorial changes following ownership shifts can trigger rapid and systematic realignment toward regime priorities—a dynamic often described as the "loyal editor effect." Shestopalova (2024) reinforces this logic by showing that Russian state-controlled outlets consistently excluded dissenting perspectives and synchronized their messaging with political objectives. Similar patterns are observed by Hutchings and Tolz (2015), who find that Russian television coverage reliably reflected state priorities in portraying national identity. A case study of TV Rain further illustrates these dynamics: after coming under financial and regulatory pressure, the channel's political coverage temporarily converged with that of Channel One, before returning to a more independent line—an effect attributed to shifts in revenue structure and editorial autonomy (Paskhalis et al. 2022). Collectively, these findings suggest that even without formal state takeover, indirect pressure may drive independent outlets to align with Kremlin narratives.

Additional theoretical support for *Hypotheses 1* and *2* comes from the literature on diversionary conflict and leader survival strategies. The *diversionary war theory* suggests that political leaders may shift public attention to threats—real or constructed—to deflect domestic discontent and consolidate authority (Tir and Jasinski 2008). This logic is reinforced by "gambling for resurrection" models, which argue that embattled leaders are more likely to initiate risky foreign policy moves, including conflict escalation, when the stakes for political survival are high (Chiozza and Goemans 2011; Goemans and Fey 2009). In such cases, the regime's media apparatus becomes instrumental in constructing external threats and legitimizing aggressive action.

Empirical research on Russian media provides additional support for both hypotheses. Content analyses find that Ukraine-related stories surged in prominence during the 2014 Crimea crisis and the 2022 invasion and were infused with emotive language portraying Ukraine as fascist and the West as hostile (Hanley and Durumeric 2023; Horbyk 2015; Khaldarova 2021; Lankina and Watanabe 2017). Further studies suggest that political talk shows and state-aligned international broadcasters amplified these frames around the crisis and in the run-up to escalation, helping to justify confrontation and bolster regime legitimacy (Elswah and Howard 2020; Lichtenstein et al. 2019; Liu 2020).

Survey research confirms that Kremlin narratives significantly shaped public belief. Many Russians accepted official claims blaming Ukraine and the West for the war in Donbas (Gerber and Zavisca 2016), while politically disengaged viewers absorbed regime messages through intuitive, low-effort reasoning rather than active scrutiny (Alyukov 2022, 2023). Shirikov (2022, 2024) finds that belief in Kremlin propaganda is not primarily a product of fear of repression, lack of information, or concern with factual accuracy. Instead, it is driven by emotional trust in state media and loyalty to the regime—conditions under which agenda-setting through increased coverage is more likely to be effective. This reinforces the mechanism behind *H1*.

Studies also point to realignment effects consistent with *H2*. As media ownership and editorial control shifted, once-independent outlets moved closer to Kremlin narratives, especially on politically sensitive topics (Fredheim 2017). Shestopalova (2024) provides additional support for the hypothesis. Using comparative analysis of Channel One and RT, she shows that both broadcasters systematically amplified hostile, dehumanizing portrayals of Ukraine around key crisis phases.

While the literature offers evidence on framing strategies and audience receptivity, it tends to focus on peak events or well-known outlets. Less is known about how these dynamics play out across a broader set of media institutions over time. This study addresses that gap by systematically testing both hypotheses across a wider media landscape.

Data

In autocracies, credible indicators of leaders' intentions are scarce, but national media provide a rare basis for inference (La Lova 2025). Accordingly, this analysis relies on three datasets: transcripts from state-controlled television networks, transcripts from

Table 2. Corpora.

Media outlet	Episodes	Availability	News episodes, daily
Channel One (Perviy Kanal)	314,794	2009–2019	78.44 (34.39)
Russia-1	341,035	2009–2019	85.82 (40.44)
NTV	229,679	2009–2019	57.35 (18.07)
Channel Five	94,743	2013–2019	43.74 (21.29)
TV Centre	178,807	2009–2019	46.78 (29.34)
Zvezda	282,432	2010–2019	81.09 (59.28)
RBC TV	313,802	2009–2019	87.24 (54.13)
TV Rain (Dozhd)	59,519	2013–2019	27.73 (13.42)
Interfax	497,537	2009–2019	123.98 (52.61)
Total	2,312,348		

relatively independent television networks, and reports published by the relatively independent news agency Interfax (Table 2). All these media outlets were accessible nationwide during the period under study, and all news reports were produced in Russian. Television transcripts were sourced from the Integrum archive—a comprehensive Russian media database containing digitized content from national and regional outlets—while Interfax reports were collected directly from the agency's website. The period selected for analysis spans from 2009 to 2019, representing the longest timeframe for which comprehensive textual archives were available at the time of data collection. The corpora were downloaded over three months at the end of 2019.

The corpora from the top three networks—Channel One (Perviy Kanal), Russia-1, and NTV—as well as the Interfax news agency, are continuous across all eleven years of the study. Meanwhile, data from smaller networks, including Channel Five (5TV), TV Centre, Zvezda, RBC, and TV Rain (Dozhd), contain gaps, with reports from some months or years missing (A3 in the Supplemental Appendix). To ensure the broadest possible understanding of news management patterns, all available transcripts from the Integrum archive were included in the analysis. Because each media outlet's corpus is analyzed separately, these missing data patterns from less prominent networks are identifiable and are unlikely to distort the results.

A standard document in these corpora is a short text averaging 216 words ($SD = 244$), typically describing a current event. A4 in the Supplemental Appendix provides two translated examples of news reports.

Empirical Approach

This study does not claim causal identification or infer editorial intent; it tests whether observed patterns of agenda-setting (salience) and alignment (increased similarity) are consistent with *H1* and *H2*. The analysis covers 2009–2019, a period that begins well before and continues through the early stages of Russia's military intervention in Ukraine, which commenced with the 2014 annexation of Crimea and escalated in

Donbas shortly thereafter. Due to technical constraints related to data access, the corpus ends in 2019 and does not include the critical period of mass mobilization preceding the 2022 full-scale invasion.

A semi-supervised machine learning algorithm labeled each of the 2.3 million news stories with their most likely country-topic. News stories most likely to focus on Ukraine were identified using a probabilistic classification model, and their share of the daily news flow was calculated for each media outlet. These trends, along with daily counts of news episodes, formed the basis for testing the first hypothesis. The impact of the state takeover of RBC TV in 2016 on Ukraine-related coverage was estimated using a difference-in-differences approach. Additionally, cosine similarity and sentiment analyses were conducted to compare RBC's reporting with that of other outlets before and after the takeover. Furthermore, a custom dictionary developed through topic modeling was applied to further examine narrative changes following RBC's transition to state control.

Newsmap

Each news report in the dataset was labeled with the most likely country-topic using *Newsmap*, an algorithm that identifies collocations of capitalized words (Watanabe 2018). The labeling can be illustrated with an example: the algorithm begins by detecting toponyms from a pre-installed dictionary of stemmed geographical locations. For instance, it identifies the word *Kyiv* in a news story and, recognizing it as the capital of Ukraine, assigns the story to the Ukraine category. Next, it searches for frequently occurring capitalized words associated with Ukraine, such as the surname of Ukraine's former President, *Poroshenko*. These newly identified words become additional predictors of the story's geographical focus. Finally, the algorithm integrates dictionary matches and newly detected predictors to assign the most likely country label to each story. This weak supervision approach achieves high labeling accuracy while avoiding the labor-intensive process of manually coding large datasets, enabling the efficient classification of extensive textual corpora.

The classification adhered to standard NLP steps. During pre-processing, stop words, numbers, punctuation, weekday names, and transcription-related textual attributes were removed. Due to the morphological complexity of Russian when using *Newsmap*, stemming and lemmatization were deliberately avoided, as these processes reduced the model's predictive performance, and original tokens were preserved to optimize accuracy. Training on an imbalanced dataset naturally resulted in higher predictive performance for frequently mentioned countries, such as Russia, Ukraine, the United States, and Syria. While accuracy was lower for minority classes, this had minimal impact on hypothesis testing. A conservative approach was adopted to ensure the overall accuracy score never fell below 80 percent.

The classification results underwent validation by human coders. Two annotators, both native Russian speakers with expertise in Russian politics and society, independently analyzed an identical, unlabeled subset of the corpus ($n = 500$). The sample size was chosen to balance the need for robust human validation with logistical feasibility

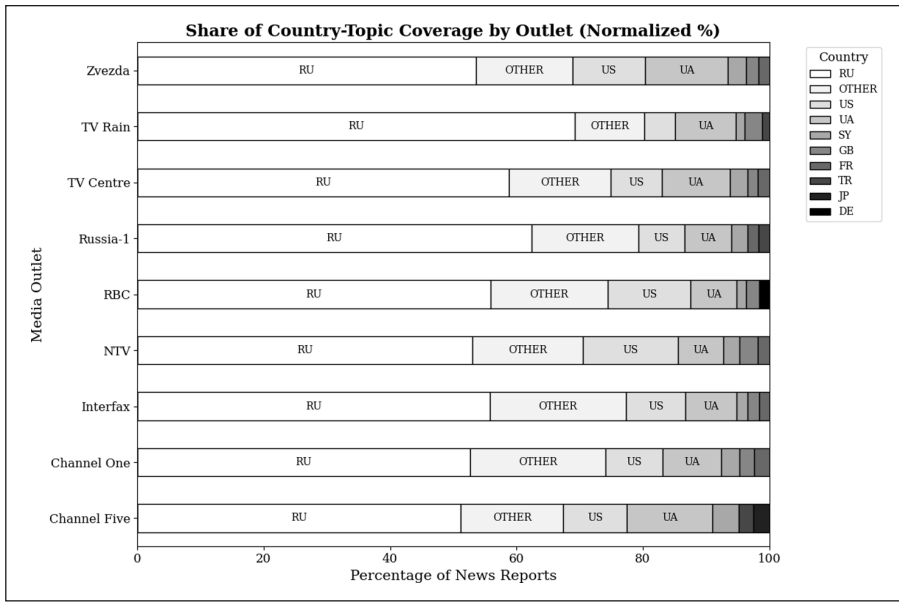

Figure 1. Media coverage patterns by country-topics across outlets, 2009–2019.

(Song et al. 2020). The annotators were tasked with identifying the most probable country-topic for each news event. The overall accuracy of the *Newsmap* classification was estimated at 88 percent, with precision scores for the categories *Russia* and *Ukraine* reaching 98 and 82 percent, respectively (see Supplemental Appendix A2 for details). The results reveal that the most common country topics in the dataset are Russia (56 percent), the United States (10 percent), Ukraine (9 percent), the United Kingdom (2 percent), Syria (2 percent), France (2 percent), Germany (1 percent), Turkey (1 percent), Japan (1 percent), Greece (1 percent), and Spain (1 percent) (Figure 1). While these proportions remain relatively consistent over time, slight variations are observed across different media outlets and periods.

Quantifying State Influence: Difference-in-Differences Test for H1

The test for *H1* employs the state-enforced management change at RBC as a treatment event within a difference-in-differences framework (Angrist and Pischke 2009: 221–48). This approach estimates the effect of state control on a media outlet's intensity of news coverage of Ukraine by comparing daily proportions of news episodes while assuming that the treatment and control groups would have followed similar trends in the absence of intervention.

Identifying a single, definitive treatment date proved both problematic and unnecessary. The initial public exposure of state pressure on RBC occurred on May 12,

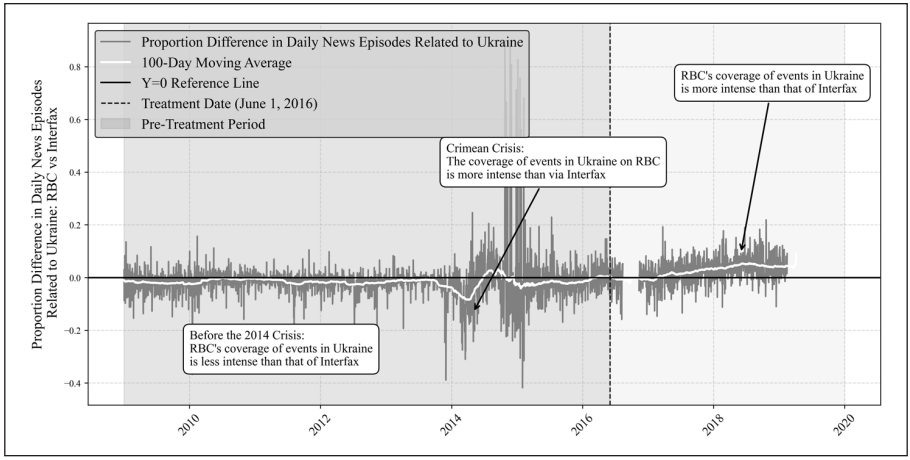

Figure 2. Daily difference in the proportion of news episodes classified as primarily focused on Ukraine: RBC compared to Interfax.

2016, followed by the dismissal of editors and management in the latter half of May, and the transfer of ownership initiated on June 16, 2016. Additionally, editorial team restructuring continued for several months, and RBC suspended the supply of programming transcripts to Integrum for three months after the organizational changes began. To address these complexities, parameters were estimated using a range of alternative treatment dates spanning the second half of 2016 (Table A5 in Supplemental Appendix). Furthermore, given the availability of data from RBC and Interfax over an eleven-year period, estimates for the average treatment effect on the treated were calculated using both the full dataset and more narrowly defined subsets. Since the difference-in-differences model assumes additive and constant treatment effects, varying the treatment dates and adjusting dataset subsets generated a spectrum of possible estimates and revealed how the magnitude of the effect evolved as state-enforced changes at RBC advanced.

The key identifying assumption underlying this strategy is that, in the absence of state intervention, trends in the intensity of Ukraine-related news coverage would have been parallel across RBC and Interfax. This assumption is strongly supported by the pre-treatment similarities between the two outlets (Figure 2). Both RBC and Interfax shared a business-oriented focus, operated nationwide, and were relatively free from direct state management prior to 2016. This alignment created a unique comparative baseline within the Russian media landscape.

For the post-treatment comparison, RBC is the intervention-exposed outlet and Interfax is the untreated comparator, since only RBC experienced the 2016 management intervention, whereas Interfax faced no comparable action in 2016–2019. Interfax's relative tolerance by the state may reflect its functional role: it supplied news not only to mass media but also to businesses and government agencies. Unlike

RBC, Interfax did not engage in investigative journalism, posing a lesser perceived threat to the regime.

Cosine Similarity

Testing H2 involved calculating cosine similarity scores using Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency (TF-IDF) to compare RBC's daily reporting with that of all other media outlets in the dataset. Cosine similarity with TF-IDF vectors (*TF-IDF*, a statistical measure that evaluates the importance of a word in a document relative to a larger corpus by balancing its frequency in a specific document against its occurrence across all documents) is particularly valuable in this context as it quantifies the overlap in textual content among mass-media outlets, enabling an assessment of narrative alignment (Sitikhu et al. 2019). A higher cosine similarity score indicates greater similarity in vocabulary and thematic focus.

Cosine similarity scores were computed daily using TF-IDF vectors for each media outlet. For each day, the model measured the similarity between RBC and every other outlet, producing a time series of daily pairwise similarity scores. While Figure 3 displays smoothed 100-day moving averages for visualization, statistical testing of convergence (*H2*) relied on comparing average similarity scores for two periods: the pre-treatment window (January 2013 to May 2016) and the post-treatment window (July 2016 to December 2019). A *t*-test was used to assess whether the mean similarity between RBC and other outlets significantly increased after the state-enforced management change.

Sentiment Scores

Sentiment variation in news stories related to Ukraine was examined using *RuSentiLex*, a lexicon specifically developed for the Russian language (Kotelnikov et al. 2018; Loukachevitch 2021; Loukachevitch and Levchik 2016). *RuSentiLex* is a manually curated dictionary that assigns sentiment values—positive, negative, or neutral—to words and phrases, making it particularly effective for analyzing sentiment in Russian text corpora. Comparative evaluations demonstrate that RuSentiLex achieves good performance in Russian-language sentiment classification, with high lexical coverage and respectable F1-scores across diverse domains such as books, movies, and consumer reviews (Kotelnikov et al. 2018; Loukachevitch 2021). It is important to note that *RuSentiLex* captures sentiment polarity (positive, neutral, or negative) rather than discrete emotional states such as fear, anger, or pride. While sentence-level analysis may offer greater granularity, this study relies on complete news reports as the unit of analysis. Since transcripts average 216 words and function as short, cohesive narratives, story-level sentiment better reflects editorial tone, while sentence-level scoring risks fragmenting meaning and introducing context-free noise.

Before applying the lexicon, the texts were pre-processed using the Snowball stemmer (Porter 2001) to standardize word forms. This preprocessing step enhances the precision of sentiment aggregation by reducing lexical variability, thereby enabling a

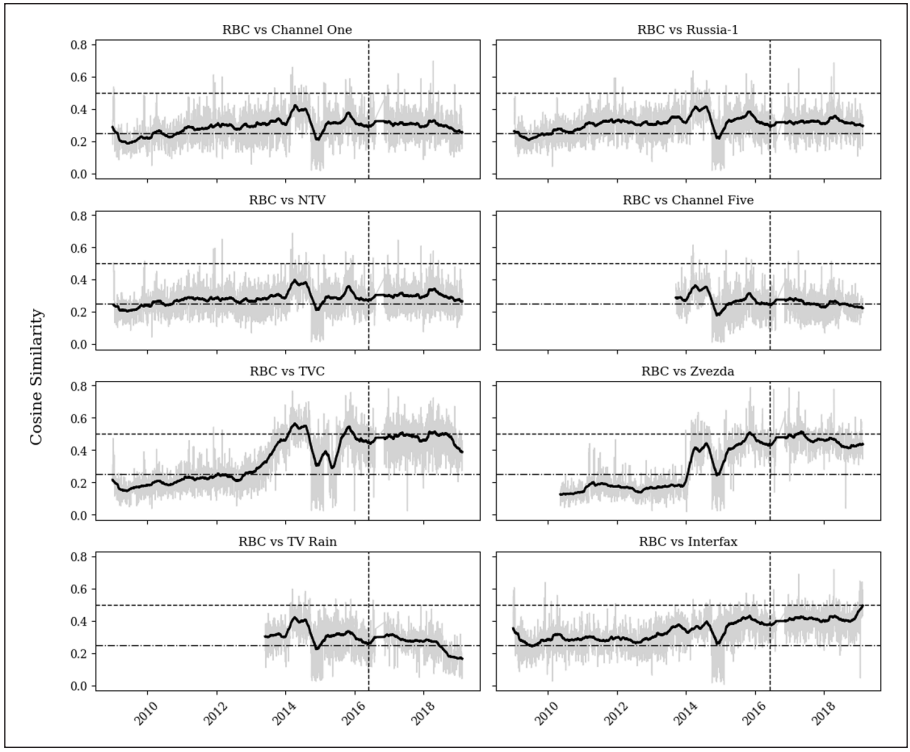

Figure 3. Cosine similarity scores: RBC versus other media outlets.
Note. The white curves represent 100-day moving averages. Reference lines are set at 0.25 and 0.5 in each subplot.

more reliable evaluation of Ukrainian-related narratives across various media outlets. The results, illustrated in Figure 4, indicate that the average sentiment score for news stories related to Ukraine consistently remained below zero across all media outlets over time. While this outcome aligns with expectations given the geopolitical context, the analysis serves as a diagnostic check, confirming the robustness of the sentiment estimation process and ensuring no irregular patterns were overlooked.

Thematic Patterns

To contextualize the empirical results, I provide a compact thematic classification of Ukraine-focused stories. This diagnostic identifies which topics account for attention and characterizes the thematic mix across outlets and periods. The exercise is strictly descriptive and does not introduce an additional research question or infer frames or audience effects; its aim is to clarify the substantive content of the coverage.

Recurring thematic patterns in news stories classified as primarily about Ukraine were identified using a custom classification dictionary. Topic modeling

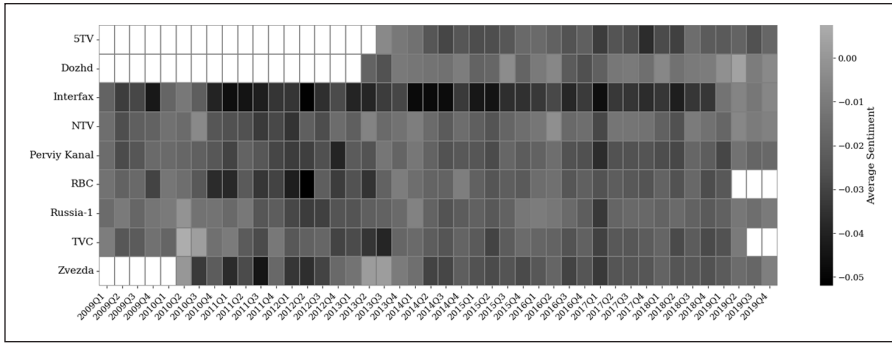

Figure 4. RuSentiLex sentiment scores for each story across media outlets.
Note. The heatmap visualizes quarterly average sentiment.

techniques—Latent Dirichlet Allocation and Latent Semantic Analysis—were applied to uncover prominent clusters of co-occurring terms (Blei et al. 2003; Deerwester et al. 1990). The key themes revealed by these models were refined into coherent categories based on their contextual relevance and frequency.

The resulting classification dictionary comprises seven thematic categories, including *Crimea and Donbas, Gas Disputes, Ukrainian Nationalists, Protests in Ukraine, Disorder in Ukraine, NATO and Ukraine*, and *Other* (A6 in the Supplemental Appendix). For instance, the *Crimea and Donbas* category captures terms like "*крым*" (*Crimea*) and "*донбас*" (*Donbas*), while *Gas Disputes* includes stems such as "*газ*" (*gas*) and "*трубопровод*" (*pipeline*). Similarly, category *Disorder in Ukraine* contains terms associated with unrest and instability (but not political protests), such as "*авари*" (*accident*), "*погиб*" (*died*), and "коррупц" (*corruption*). This classification approach allowed me to label approximately 86 percent of the Ukraine-related stories in the dataset with high confidence. The dictionary provided a systematic framework for analyzing thematic coverage, helping to identify recurring topic patterns in Ukraine-related reporting across different media outlets. It was validated by two native Russian-speaking coders with expertise in Russian politics and media (See A6 in the Supplemental Appendix for further details).

Results

The results provide support for *H1*. Following the state takeover, RBC increased the share of its news coverage focused on Ukraine, with the estimated increase ranging from 36.55 to 40.20 percent, depending on the assumed treatment date and the subset of the corpus analyzed (A5 in the Supplemental Appendix). For example, assuming the treatment occurred on June 1, 2016, and using all available data across the corpus, the increase in the share of news coverage classified as focused on Ukraine on RBC amounts to 36.55 percent. The regression estimates from the linear model indicate statistical significance at the 0.01 level, with the magnitude of the treatment effect increasing as the assumed treatment date shifts further in time.

Table 3. *t*-Test Results for Changes in Cosine Similarity Scores.

Comparison	Mean before	Mean after	Direction
Channel One (Perviy Kanal) vs. RBC	0.286	0.299	Increased
Russia-1 vs. RBC	0.304	0.317	Increased
NTV vs. RBC	0.277	0.299	Increased
Channel Five (5TV) vs. RBC	0.276	0.252	**Decreased**
TV Centre (TVC) vs. RBC	0.307	0.477	Increased
Zvezda vs. RBC	0.258	0.459	Increased
TV Rain (Dozhd) vs. RBC	0.317	0.256	**Decreased**
Interfax vs. RBC	0.317	0.413	Increased

Note. All changes are significant at 0.01 level.

The direction and magnitude of the effect are best illustrated graphically. Figure 2 demonstrates that the intensity of news coverage focused on Ukraine on RBC was, on average, lower than on Interfax in the years preceding the state takeover (with the exception of the Crimea crisis) and higher in the post-treatment years.

There are at least two reasons to believe that the estimates presented here reflect a conservative assessment of how state-linked changes may be associated with shifts in news management. First, although reporting by Interfax is used as a benchmark, there is little reason to assume that the agency, operating within Russia, produced entirely independent news. Second, since both RBC and Interfax focused on more business-oriented content compared to other nationwide networks, it is likely that other state-controlled media outlets, targeting a less-educated audience, produce even more biased news coverage.

The results provide only partial evidence in support of *H2*. *t*-Tests of cosine similarity suggest that, following the state takeover, RBC's reporting became more similar in content to that of all state-controlled media outlets, with the exception of Channel Five (5TV). Conversely, its similarity to TV Rain (Dozhd)—the only television channel that remained relatively independent—decreased (Table 3). However, the magnitude of these changes is modest, making it difficult to assert strong evidence in favor of *H2*. This suggests that while state influence on RBC's reporting is observable, it did not lead to a complete similarity with the content patterns of other state-controlled outlets.

The *t*-test results for changes in sentiment scores highlight the differences in editorial practices over time across state-controlled and relatively independent outlets (Table 4). While RBC exhibited an increasing trend in negativity, aligning with several state-controlled networks, TV Rain (Dozhd) remained stable, which may be attributed to its relative editorial independence. However, it is important to note that all observed changes, whether positive or negative, were also of relatively small magnitude. Entries in bold indicate channels for which the cosine similarity to RBC decreased over time.

Further exploratory analysis using the dictionary reveals a notable change. In 2017–2019, the share of news categorized as *Disorder in Ukraine* on RBC increased

Table 4. *t*-Test Results for Changes in Sentiment Scores.

Media outlet	Mean before	Mean after	Direction	Significant at 0.01 level
Channel One (Perviy Kanal)	−0.022	−0.025	Became more negative	Yes
Russia-1	−0.019	−0.018	No significant change	No
NTV	−0.018	−0.015	Became more positive	Yes
Channel Five (5TV)	−0.024	−0.025	No significant change	No
TV Centre (TVC)	−0.021	−0.023	Became more negative	Yes
RBC	−0.019	−0.023	Became more negative	Yes
Zvezda	−0.025	−0.024	Became more positive	Yes
TV Rain (Dozhd)	−0.013	−0.013	No significant change	No
Interfax	−0.039	−0.031	Became more positive	Yes

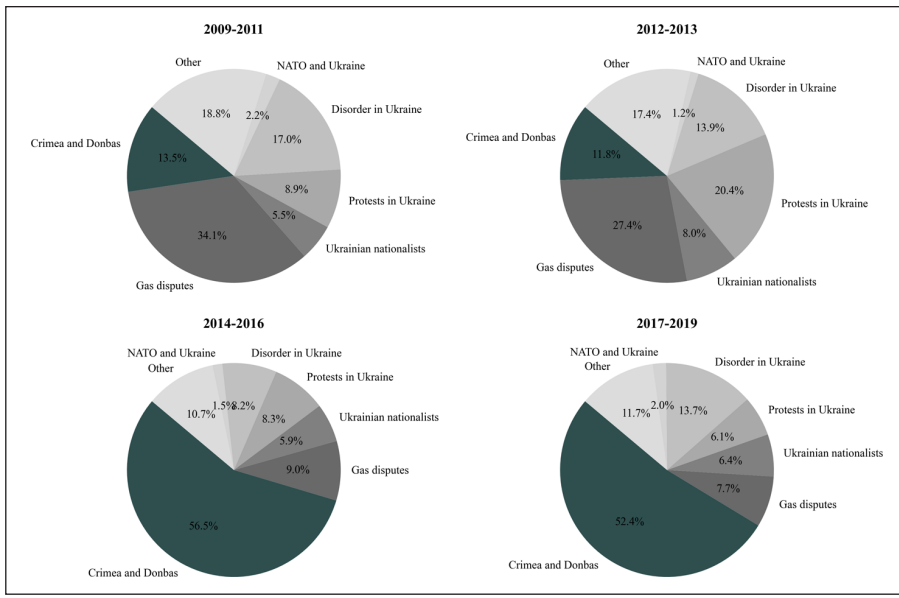

Figure 5. Dictionary classification for texts from RBC.
Note. A6 in Supplemental Appendix provides analogous pie charts for all the other media.

compared to previous years (13.7 vs. 8.2 percent, Figure 5) and became more aligned with the corresponding shares observed on state-controlled channels (A6 in the Supplemental Appendix). The observed increase aligns with the argument that authoritarian media emphasize foreign instability to delegitimize protest movements domestically and bolster regime resilience (Otlan et al. 2023).

Discussion and Conclusion

This article demonstrates that Russian state-controlled television gradually increased the prominence and negativity of Ukraine-related coverage in the years following 2014, thereby helping to construct a sustained narrative that preceded the full-scale invasion. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was framed domestically and internationally as a preemptive defense, an emancipatory movement, and a call for the denazification of a neighboring state (Putin 2021). Drawing on television news transcripts from 2009 to 2019, this study identifies systematic changes in the volume, sentiment, and thematic structure of Ukraine-related coverage and highlights how foreign policy issues gained prominence in Russian broadcast news over time.

The study finds a 40 percent increase in Ukraine-related reporting at RBC TV following the 2016 state-enforced management change. While the analysis does not capture internal editorial processes, it shows measurable changes in reporting volume, textual similarity, and tone that point to closer alignment with state-favored narratives. Yet evidence for increased similarity to state-controlled outlets (*H2*) is only partial: shifts in similarity and sentiment are modest, indicating continued differentiation in messaging. These results complement findings on soft propaganda in autocracies (Carter and Carter 2023) and demonstrate how information control may operate through variation in emphasis and tone rather than through uniform messaging.

This article contributes to scholarship on television's role in authoritarian regimes (Enikolopov et al. 2011; Pan et al. 2020). While most prior research emphasizes media effects on public opinion, this study focuses on structural trends in media content to explore how narratives evolve within systems of constrained editorial autonomy. This focus is consequential because television remains a central information source in many autocracies, particularly where access to alternative media is limited.

More broadly, this study informs several overlapping literatures. First, it contributes to media studies by offering empirical evidence on the treatment of foreign conflict in non-free media environments (Shestopalova 2024). Second, it speaks to *diversionary war* theory (Oakes 2012) by tracing the growing domestic salience of international conflict. Third, it engages with the *autocratic resilience* literature, particularly the argument that modern authoritarian regimes rely more heavily on persuasion and narrative control than on coercion (Guriev and Treisman 2022). While existing research agrees that mass media play a critical role in regime durability (Gehlbach and Sonin 2014), less is known about how foreign policy issues are curated for domestic audiences. This study helps to fill that gap by documenting Ukraine-related news dynamics in the years preceding Russia's full-scale invasion.

The methodology of this study relies heavily on computational text analysis. While this approach offers significant advantages for analyzing large-scale corpora, it cannot fully capture the nuanced and contextual meaning of human language. To mitigate these limitations, multiple validation steps—such as human annotation—were employed to enhance accuracy and reliability. Despite these limitations, *Text-as-Data* methods enabled the analysis of over two million news episodes with relatively high

precision—an achievement that would have been prohibitively expensive and time-consuming using manual coding alone. For context, if labeling one report takes approximately two minutes, manually annotating this dataset with two human coders working full-time would require around thirty-nine years of uninterrupted labor.

An important limitation of the analysis is that the period covered by the dataset ends in 2019. Despite this limitation, the timeframe remains central for examining the long-term consolidation of hostile narratives toward Ukraine. The analysis shows a decade-long increase in Ukraine-related coverage, modest shifts toward negative polarity at RBC, and partial alignment with state-controlled outlets. Although the final mobilization phase falls outside this window, the data indicate that media attempts at priming were already well under way before 2022.

Prior to 2022, scholars commonly portrayed modern autocrats as less violence-prone than their predecessors (Guriev and Treisman 2022). The invasion of Ukraine complicates this view. The persistent prominence of Ukraine in Russian television news throughout the 2010s may have helped to normalize a sense of external threat. In this light, the media patterns identified here become particularly salient. Additionally, national surveys in Russia conducted from 2009 to 2019 show rising approval of presidential leadership and foreign policy, despite worsening economic conditions and growing international isolation (Levada-Center 2019a; Hale 2018, 2022). These findings suggest a possible relationship between strategic media content and in-group cohesion—an area that invites further empirical study.

To build on these insights, future research should pursue cross-national analyses of how authoritarian regimes manage foreign-conflict coverage through domestic media systems. This study illustrates how computational text analysis can be used to examine these patterns at scale. With increasing access to digitized archives and advances in *Text-as-Data* methodologies, comparative analysis across autocracies is becoming increasingly feasible.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. Following Shestopalova (2024), this earlier phase is treated as a precursor to the *full-scale invasion* that began in 2022. Supplemental Appendix A0 provides additional details on related events.

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