

# EU and Ukraine in the Eyes of Russia: Media Perceptions of Russian Relations with the EU and Ukraine

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Paper No. 16



# Mainz Papers on International and European Politics (MPIEP)

ISSN: 2193-6684

Edited by the Chair of International Relations, University of Mainz

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Shukurova, Asalkhon (2018): EU and Ukraine in the Eyes of Russia: Media Perceptions of Russian Relations with the EU and Ukraine. Joint Working Paper Series of Mainz Papers on International and European Politics (MPIEP) No. 16 and Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence “EU in Global Dialogue” (CEDI) Working Paper Series No. 8. Mainz: Chair of International Relations, Johannes Gutenberg University.

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# EU and Ukraine in the Eyes of Russia: Media Perceptions of Russian Relations with the EU and Ukraine

Asalkhon Shukurova

## Abstract

Almost three years after the Euromaidan protests in 2013-2014, the circumstances in East Ukraine seem to be burdened by a frozen conflict. Russia is still holding on to the story that the annexation of Crimea was a “free referendum” of Ukrainian people expressing their desire to belong territorially to Russia. Unsolved conflicts and the future architecture of relations between Russia, Ukraine and the EU need to be redefined and remain a key strategic challenge for the EU. “A consistent and united approach must remain the cornerstone of EU policy towards Russia” (EEAS 2016). As suggested by the EU Global Strategy, to develop a dialogue-led, two-way interaction between equal partners is recognised as promising and, on the other hand, strenuous. The elites within the EU as well as the media should perceive the deficits in their own behaviour and develop new strategies on the ground. This paper presents a media perception study. The central question of this research is how Ukraine and the EU are perceived in Russian media. Three leading Russian newspapers (Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Kommersant, Komsomolskaya Pravda) have been selected to analyse the Russian media perception. The study coded over 500 articles that were published in May, September and October 2015.

**Keywords:** European Union, Russia, Ukraine, Crimea, East Ukraine Conflict, media analysis, images and perceptions



## **1. Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to understand how the EU and, especially, Ukraine are perceived in the Russian media. The conflict involving the actors - EU, Russia and Ukraine - has to be seen as embedded in the relationship between the EU and Ukraine within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) (Ademmer 2014). This is currently a highly relevant issue, politically and otherwise, in view of the political confrontation between Russia and Ukraine and the EU in the regional conflict. Through a multidisciplinary approach, consisting of the international relations theory of constructivism and media theory, we are evaluating the perceptions of Russian media on an empirical basis. The perceptions of an actor can serve as “[...] a basis for understanding and a foundation upon which actors make choices and decisions. Understanding the perceptions of the ‘other’ side can provide a basis for improved communication and give a guidance on policy adjustments” (Chaban/Holland 2010: 128).

## **2. The EU and Ukraine – Russia Conflict**

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine has been crucial and a core partner in Russian foreign policy. The relationship between these two countries is based on historical, cultural and economic ties; however, there are also multiple points of friction. Russia sees itself as a strong regional actor with good relationships/ties with its neighbouring countries. However, „Russia has not managed to construct a single coherent conception of how to bring its interests to bear on the reality that Russia and Ukraine are now two sovereign states. Russia’s political elite has no wish to restore the USSR, and it clearly understands that this would be impossible, but there still is no agreement about what should replace it” (Bogomolov/Lytvynenko 2012: 2).

For instance, its relationship with Ukraine, in the post-Soviet era, symbolises an important geostrategic showcase. Especially, since Putin’s political orientation focussed on a stronger Russia with its post-Soviet allies and its geostrategic counter project to the EU, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), where, from the Russian perspective, Ukraine enjoys a place of honour in this system. Russia hoped that Ukraine would join the EAEU. While the Ukrainian government, represented by Viktor Yanukovich, stopped the planned association agreement between the EU and Ukraine in November 2013, the Euromaidan protest in favour of Western integration and democratic reforms began (and lasted until February 2014). For Ukraine, this conflict marked the starting point of a deep cleavage between EU- and Russia-oriented elements in society, which resulted in the ouster of President Yanukovich, and escalated with Russia’s annexation of the Crimea and armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, specifically the Donbass region. In this situation the EU acted as a much more “consolidated actor” than it would later in the uprising conflict, as the European Commission and the European Parliament succeeded in creating a single position (Shelest 2016: 481).

The conflict between Ukraine and Russia over Crimea and East Ukraine, which started at the beginning of 2014, costing lives of nearly 10,000 people (Baumann/Junginger 2017: 36), to this date, remains unsolved. “The annexation of Crimea by Russian special units, whose deployment was initially denied by President Vladimir Putin but then publicly confirmed a year later, violated applicable international law and undermined Ukraine’s territorial integrity” (Baumann/Junginger 2017: 27). Russia’s role in East Ukraine stays unclear as it is denying its involvement in the conflict. According to the Russian official position the conflict is a civil war among Ukrainians, with minimal Russian involvement (Kimmage 2017: 3).

The EU as a regional and international actor has different modes of cooperation with many countries across the world. In addition, the EU is committed to the role of stabilizing the European region. Therefore, its interest lies greatly in maintaining international relationships and strategic partnerships with many countries, especially in its regional neighbourhood. It also

represents an important geopolitical partner for the Russian Federation and plays an almost irreplaceable role, particularly in the Russian economy and energy trade. In addition, since the outbreak of the conflict, the EU has been involved as an actor in the conflict, in parallel with diplomatic efforts through its sanction and visa policy. In the summer of 2014, the EU imposed sanctions on Russia, as the US and other Western allies did (Kostanyan/Meister 2016: 2). The measures cover the financial, energy and defence sectors and dual-use goods, and sanctions against persons linked to the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine. The sanctions have been extended several times. The strategic partnership and constructive dialogue with Russia has also been frozen. Economic sanctions were especially controversial among the EU Member States due to their heterogeneous economic interests, and a common position was only found after heated negotiations at the EU level. The same holds true regarding the pending decision on visa facilitation for Ukrainian citizens.

At present, Russia and Ukraine's relationship is especially strained due to Russia's foreign policy actions against Ukraine in recent years. As Russia has been increasingly criticized by the EU, relations between the EU and Russia have also become complicated and strained. The extent to which Russia can develop a harmonious foreign policy relationship with the EU and Ukraine in the near future is uncertain. Looking back at the events in Ukraine (uprisings in Maidan square, conflict in the eastern Ukraine and the annexation of the Crimea) and, also, considering the proximity of Ukraine to Europe, understanding especially Russia's perception of Ukraine and the EU would be helpful and fruitful in understanding the complex relationship among these parties.

### **3. Methodological Framework**

This paper is based on a multidisciplinary approach that combines international relations theory (constructivism), various approaches from communications and media theory (framing theory, images and perceptions), foreign affairs, and quantitative and qualitative media methodology. To conduct this study, data were collected from three leading Russian print media outlets in 2015 (Komsomolskaya Pravda/КР (Комсомольская правда), Kommersant/КОМ (Коммерсантъ) and Rossiyskaya Gazeta/RG (Российская газета)). Together, these components provide a different, innovative way to better understand the details and perceptions of each actor.

#### **3.1 Theoretical Approach**

The theoretical basis comes from the social constructivist understanding, which highlights the influence of dominant perceptions of other actors on foreign policy (Rüger 2012: 130). The perceptions of other actors are highly relevant in constructivist theory, which holds that the social environment of an actor and the perception of reality in which the actors and individuals identify with the norms in the social environment play a central role (Ulbert 2005: 9). Only through their interactions with other actors, states can socially develop their identity-building processes and inter-state interaction. For this reason, Nicholas Onuf speaks of a differentiated construction of reality, whereby the actors formulate their norms and values regarding logic and social action (see Onuf 1989). This theoretical approach makes it possible to understand Russia as an actor and its interaction with other actors, which leads to our next theoretical approach: media theory.

#### **3.2 Framing, Images and Perceptions**

Media theory is based on the literature highlighting the impact of media. This research investigates the effects and consequences of media reception (Maletzke 1981: 33). The empirical analysis of Russian perceptions of the EU and Ukraine is theorized based on the concepts of framing and images and perceptions theory.

Framing is a central process in influencing information and is supported by “selecting and highlighting some facts or events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution” (Entman 2008: 287). Journalists and political leaders influence one another and the public through mass media. Thus, framing information is an indispensable process for the elimination and filtering of information. “In news production, the term ‘framing’ refers to the decisions, taken at each stage of the news production process, that determine the manner in which the various events, issues and actors that constitute the news are presented to news consumers, and, indeed, which events, issues and actors constitute the news.” (Chaban et al. 2008: 22)

In summary, it can be said that media framing, by highlighting and selecting some events and actors in the print media, can achieve considerable resonance among the audience. Additionally, for thematic containment and the selection of what the recipient is able to read within the media, another theoretical aspect of media impact research plays a central role in our work, namely the emotive charge of the coverage of the EU and Ukraine in the Russian print media. Employing not only frames but also images of these frames makes the emotional appeal of the actor’s perception clearer and more compelling in the media framing environment. “Images and perceptions of other nations provide the basic framework within which the conduct of international relations and conflict resolution takes place.” (Chaban/Holland 2014: 7)

### **3.3 Selection of Print Media and Media Analysis Period**

The selection of newspapers for the analysis in this work employed several selection criteria. First, the newspapers must represent different political positions and address different readership communities (business, tabloid, government). In addition, the print media must be easily accessible and affordable to the Russian population and thus need to have a large circulation. According to these criteria, it can be assumed that it is possible to estimate the public opinion along broad dimensions.

On the basis of the above-mentioned criteria the three leading Russian newspapers were selected: *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Kommersant* and *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (KP) is one of the best-selling daily tabloid newspapers in Russia.<sup>1</sup> The second analysed newspaper, *Kommersant* (KOM), is one of the most famous business newspapers in Russia. Lastly, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* (RG), the largest Russian daily newspaper after the boulevard press, is the official government newspaper (Schulz 2014). For the year 2015, all three newspapers were ranked first on the Title Popularity Ranking (TPR).<sup>3</sup> All three newspapers were included among the top 10 most frequently quoted newspapers in 2015.<sup>4</sup>

The analysis periods for the year 2015 were determined by two important events for Russian foreign policy, which are also linked to foreign policy challenges for the EU and Ukraine. „Over the near term, the most contested issues between Russia and the West are likely to be Ukraine and the EU’s eastern neighbourhood, the Syrian war, and economic and energy relations.” (Babayan et al. 2016: 8). Therefore, both periods can be considered as two interesting and exemplary snapshots of Russian foreign policy under Putin. The fourth Eastern Partnership (EaP) Summit in Riga took place on 21st and 22nd May 2015, which is the basis for the investigation period running from 11th May to 31st May 2015. The second period of investigation is based on the Russian military deployment in Syria and runs from 30th September to 13th October 2015.

Based on the time frame of the analysis, certain keywords were selected for the collection of the coding units for the EU and Ukraine. This means that every article from the selected

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<sup>1</sup> Bbc.uk (2008): The press in Russia; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4315129.stm> (Accessed: 14.12.2017).

<sup>3</sup> Ex.libris.ru (2015): TPR; <http://www.exlibris.ru/rejting-izdanij/> (Access: 14.12.2017).

<sup>4</sup> Mlg.ru (2015): Федеральные СМИ-2015 (Federal mass media-2015) [http://www.mlg.ru/ratings/federal\\_media/4009/](http://www.mlg.ru/ratings/federal_media/4009/) (Access: 14.12.2017).

newspapers has been evaluated with at least one keyword. The evaluation also incorporated Russia's perception of its inner self, which was determined based on the EU- and Ukraine-related articles that also included Russia's keywords.

### **3.4 Categories of Analysis (Visibility, Local Resonance, Actorness, Resonance)**

A questionnaire was used to collect the data employed to produce the results presented in this work. The questionnaire was divided into four core categories: 1) Visibility, 2) Local resonance, 3) Actorness, and 4) Resonance (Table 1). This ensured that the content analysis could credibly provide a methodologically correct and well-founded approach to achieve trackable and scientifically reliable results (Heindl 2015: 299).

The first criterion - "Visibility" - elaborates the formal aspects of the analysis by means of two further indicators (volume and degree of centrality). "The visibility accorded to an actor is significant since it serves as an indicator for news consumers of the perceived salience and significance of a reported counterpart." (Chaban et al. 2008: 25). The first indicator corresponds to the volume, which is shown by the total number of all articles. The second indicator measures the degree of centrality of the investigated actor (the EU, Ukraine, Russia) in the article. The degree of centrality is divided into three different measurement categories: primary, secondary and minor. Primary perspective, with high degree of centrality, within an article is given to an investigated actor who acts centrally in the article, that is, when the described events are solely concentrated on the respective actor. If, within an article, two (or more) actors are treated with equal importance in the story, they are classified as a secondary perspective. A low degree of centrality, minor perspective, occurs when the actor is mentioned only fleetingly in the article.

*Table 1 Summary of criteria for data analysis*

| <b>Criterion</b>       | <b>Indicator</b>  |
|------------------------|---|
| <b>Visibility</b>      | Volume & degree of centrality   |
| <b>Local resonance</b> | Source & focus of domesticity   |
| <b>Actorness</b>       | Actor EU/EU officials/EU institutions/EU member states (MS)/EU MS officials<br>Actor Ukraine/Ukraine officials/Ukraine institutions<br>Thematic frames (Politics, Energy, etc.) |
| <b>Resonance</b>       | Evaluation of the EU, Ukraine & Russia<br>Images & perceptions  |

The second criterion is "Local resonance" - it consists of two indicators (source and focus of domesticity.) The source describes the author of the news story. "Given that information sources are critical in news production, it is helpful to consider what sources were used by monitored news outlets" (Chaban/Holland 2005: 74). The author of the article gives us information about who has framed the article. The origin of the source indicates its credibility and is therefore a crucial indicator to understand the intentions of the story or its misperceptions. The second indicator, focus of domesticity, measures how the contextualization of the EU or Ukraine is embedded in the local discourse of Russian media. This contextualization consists of two segments, the external and internal viewing angles. High perception of an actor usually incorporates both views, making an actor more understandable to the reader.

The third criterion of the data analysis is "Actorness" - it implies in which content frame the investigated actor moves and serves to obtain a more concrete perception of an actor and the

framework of action. The findings of this category provide qualitative insights into an actor's scope of action and thus complement the quantitative measurements such as the visibility of an actor and the thematic frame. Actorness is divided into two indicators: actor (being EU or Ukraine) and their subsequent thematic frames. In addition to visibility, the actor indicator defines who is visible within a specific thematic frame in the news. The second indicator deals with the thematic frames in which these actors operate. The thematic frame refers to the main domain of the article. Each article was assigned at least one of eight thematic frames depending on its content, i.e. Politics, Economy, Energy, or Research, Science and Technology (RST) frame.

The fourth criterion is "Resonance" – it covers the emotive appeal of the articles and consists of two indicators: evaluation and images/perceptions. The first indicator includes the overall evaluation of the action of the actor in the article (from positive to negative). The second indicator, images (pictorial representation, metaphors) and perceptions, represents the qualitative validations in the encoded articles. Taken together with the actorness, images and perceptions mirror an emotive linking to an actor. This allows to assess the external images of the EU and Ukraine in an empirically-informed systematic way, which was developed through multidisciplinary studies of the EU external perceptions by Natalia Chaban and Martin Holland (see Chaban/Holland 2004). Thus, by utilising this multidisciplinary approach and its evaluated data, it allows to build a specific meticulous understanding of an actor for an analysed period.

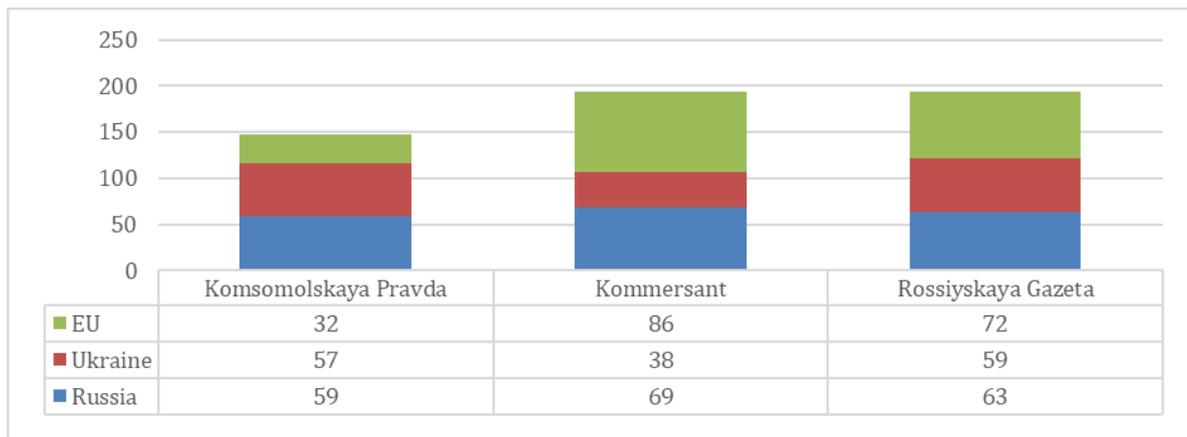
## **4. Main Findings**

### **4.1 Data Collection**

As mentioned above, all data was collected from three leading Russian print media outlets in 2015 (in the periods of May and September-October). The basis of the data collection comprises a total of 255 articles. All articles appeared in an issue of a daily newspaper. Some articles had to be evaluated several times because of their appropriateness for all three actors (EU, Ukraine, and Russia). In summary, a total of 535 articles were encoded.

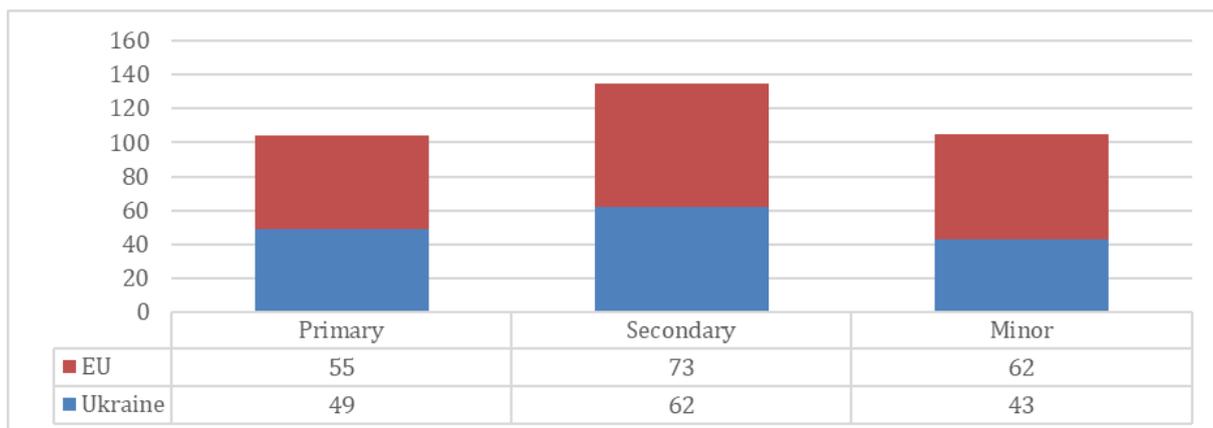
### **4.2 Visibility (EU, Ukraine)**

The findings on the "Visibility" of the EU and Ukraine are summarized below. The total number of EU encoded articles was 190, whereas 154 articles were coded Ukraine (Figure 1). EU articles appeared mostly in government and business print media (RG, KOM), while Ukraine-framed pieces appeared mostly in the tabloid press (KP). Overall, the visibility of the EU within the KP newspaper is much lower than the visibility of Ukraine. Interestingly, several series of articles on Ukraine were written in the tabloid newspaper. These articles were often long and emotionally charged. For example, in May, the issues that were in the foreground were the pro-Russian separatist movement and the socially critical situation in eastern Ukraine (Ponomarov 2015a; 2015b; 2015c; 2015d; 2015e; 2015f).



*Figure 1 Total number of articles (EU, Ukraine, and Russia)*

The centrality is a further indicator of the scale of visibility of the EU and Ukraine in Russian newspapers (Figure 2). The high perception of the EU and Ukraine in the first period can also be seen in the centrality of the news, which can be classified as primary or secondary in both data sets for the month of May. During the period from September to October, the investigated Russian news media tends to focus on other international and global news, with the EU and Ukraine being less represented during the second investigation period. Additionally, the September-October issues reflect the criticism of the EU media over not being truthful about Russia’s engagement in Syria. News articles were describing the Russian acts against terrorism in Syria in detail. Here European press was lumped together with the US press, which were noted as western ones against Russia (Strokan/Safronov/Tarasenko 2015; Chernenko/Solovyov 2015). Consequently, it is clear to us that the EU is hardly perceived as a global player but rather as a regional actor (issues in May). Also, Ukraine is not perceived as an international actor in the Russian news and is even cited by the Russian press as not being an interesting issue on the global scale (Tarasenko 2015).



*Figure 2 Degree of centrality (EU, Ukraine)*

### 4.3 Local resonance (EU, Ukraine)

The next criterion, “Local resonance”, consists of two indicators: the source and focus of domesticity. It did not reveal clear differences between our studied actors. The first indicator, source, gathered almost exclusively indigenous sources. Ultimately, if one links the approaches of media impact research and the general press situation in Russia, it can be assumed that the Russian population observes the one-sided, non-harmful, and hardly critical message of the

Russian government in all three media outlets. Regarding the second indicator, focus of domesticity, a further similarity is found in both data sets. Both the EU and Ukraine were mentioned by the majority with the participation of Russian actors - giving a story an additional emotional mapping for pro-Russian opinion building and perception in the Russian media.

Interestingly, in the EU news, there was a stronger representation of its member states. Germany, France and the United Kingdom were contextualized in many news articles. Their perception seems to be high compared with other member states of the EU.

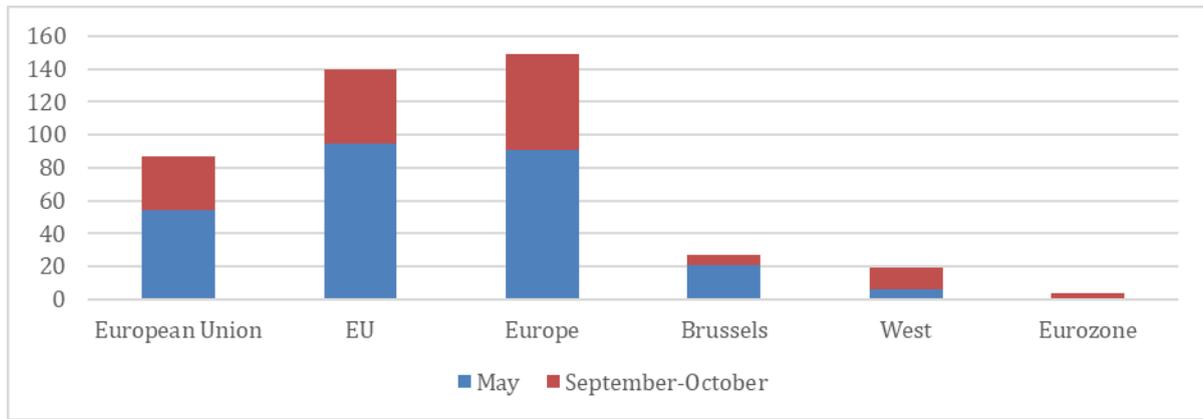
## **4.4 Actorness**

Turning to our next criterion "Actorness", consisting of two indicators, actors of the EU and Ukraine along with their thematic frames. This indicator plays a crucial role by showing which actor receives attention, respectively, as perceived in Russian media and therefore becomes apparent.

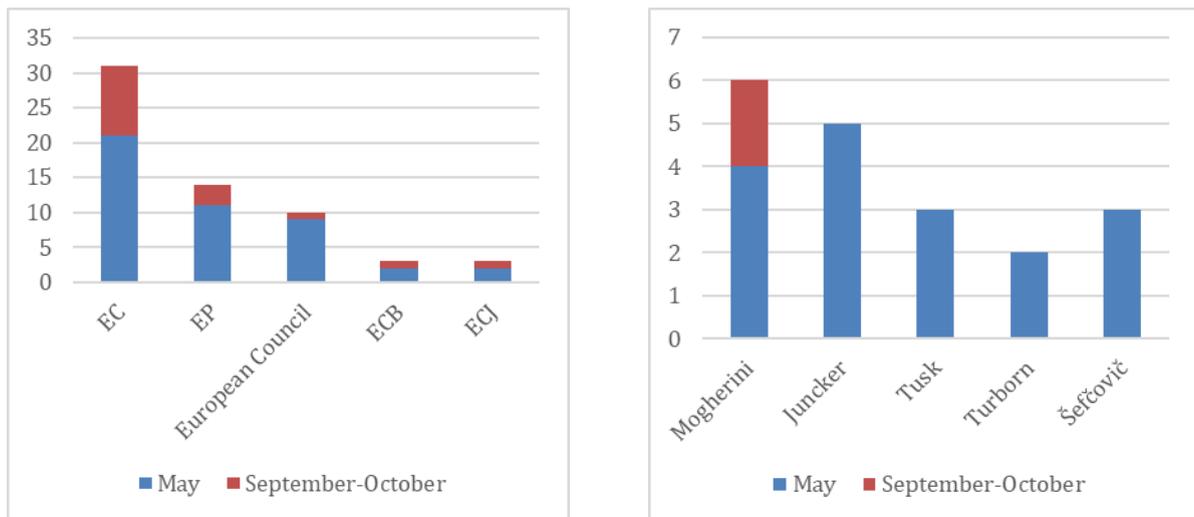
### **4.4.1 Actorness (Actor EU)**

Regarding the EU's stakeholders, it is clear that EU representatives and institutions have no clear visibility. The EU was mainly mentioned as through the keywords of "EU", "Brussels" "European Union" and "Europe" (see Figures 3-4). The EU member states and their government representatives were presented differently. This becomes apparent when the number of references coded as EU officials is compared to the number of references of EU Member State officials in articles. Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, was mentioned six times while German chancellor Angela Merkel was mentioned 27 times (see Figures 4-5).

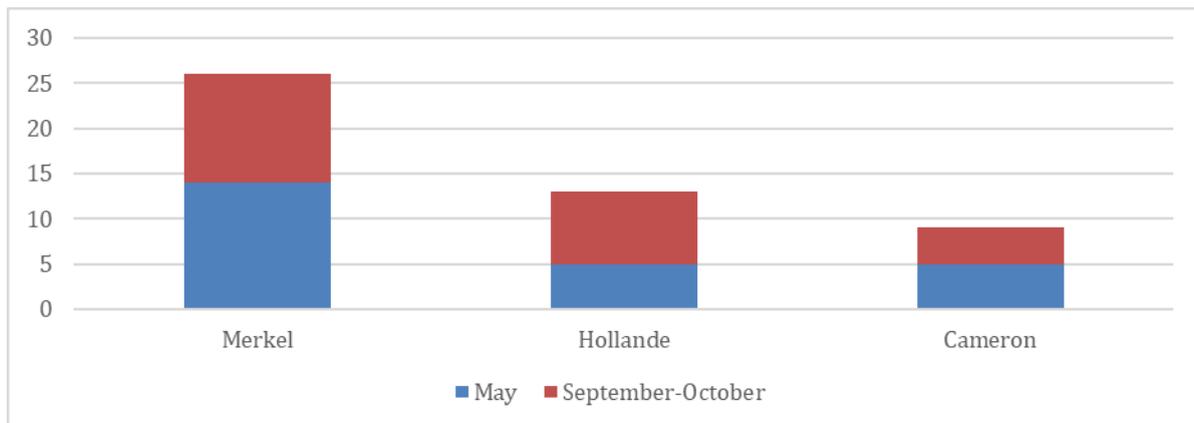
It is important to mention that Germany and France were represented among the member states as driving actors and were often cited in the news (Minsk Agreement, EaP). In particular, the articles about the resolving of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine (Minsk Agreement) cast Germany and France as leading actors. These actors, cast as mediators between Russia and Ukraine, were perceived from positive to neutral. This demonstrates the connotation of Germany and France and the EU's regional role in the Ukrainian Conflict. The European refugee crisis was also one of the important topics where the actor EU and its member states were the main focus of the story. The refugee crisis was used by Russian media to show that the European Union and its member states are overburdened already and are not strong enough to be a regional power, unlike Russia. Especially, in the articles in May the EU was presented as a fragile union because of the numerous challenges, such as the refugee crisis and the discontent of EU member states regarding the EU's refugee policy. The EU and its actors were partially accompanied by contradictory statements in Russian news media. While an image of a regionally strong EU was present in the context of the Minsk agreement, an image of a fragile EU (by example of the refugee crisis) was painted with regard to future economic cooperation with Russia, the future of Eastern Partnership Projects and potential new members of the EU.



*Figure 3 Number of articles that mention Actor EU*



*Figure 4 Number of articles that mention Actor EU institutions (left); Actor EU officials (right)*



*Figure 5 Number of articles that mention Actor EU MS officials*

#### **4.4.2 Actorness (Actor Ukraine)**

A strong presence of the institutions and government bodies of Ukraine cannot be observed in articles on Ukraine. Despite the different names of the respective ministries, almost all of them were mentioned only sporadically. The exception was the Ukrainian parliament, “Verkhovna

Rada”, which was mentioned a total of 19 times, while the other Ukrainian institutions were hardly mentioned. The keyword "Ukraine" was thus the most visible designation (see Figure 6). Referring to the government representatives of Ukraine, Poroshenko was also strongly present (see Figure 7). The other Ukrainian government representatives were mentioned only sporadically. Neither Yanukovych nor Tymoshenko were intensively addressed in the news, which contradicted our initial assumptions before collecting the data. Tymoshenko and Yanukovych were the most discussed Ukrainian officials before the uprising began in Maidan Square. Compared to the EU, the result to assessing the actorness of Ukraine were much more coherent. The Ukraine, as actor and as government, had high visibility in Russian press which was strongly negative. The incapacity of Ukrainian government was strongly criticized by Russian media, where Russia posed itself as more capable actor.

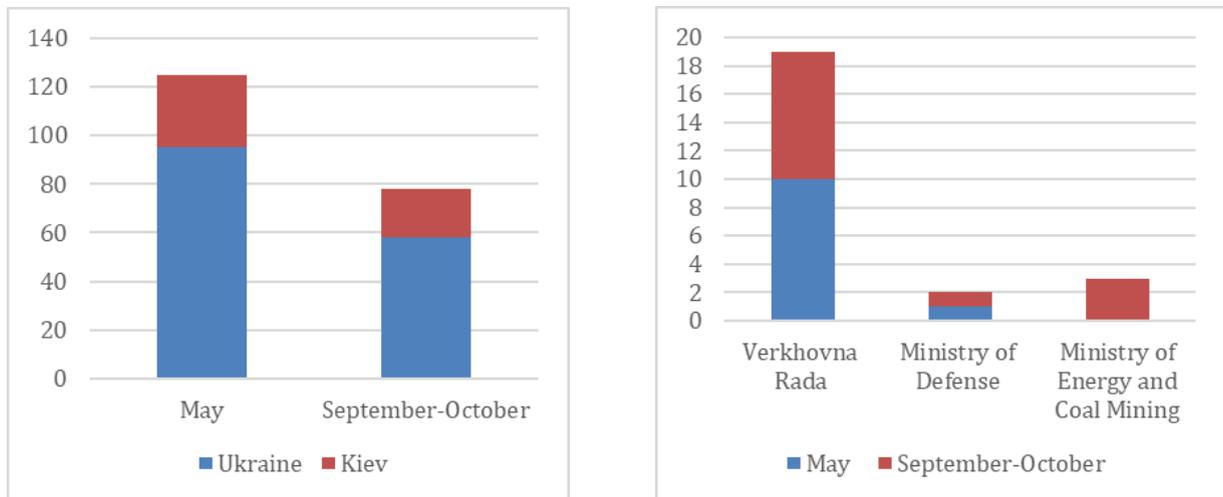


Figure 6 Number of articles that include Actor Ukraine (left); Actor Ukraine institutions (right)

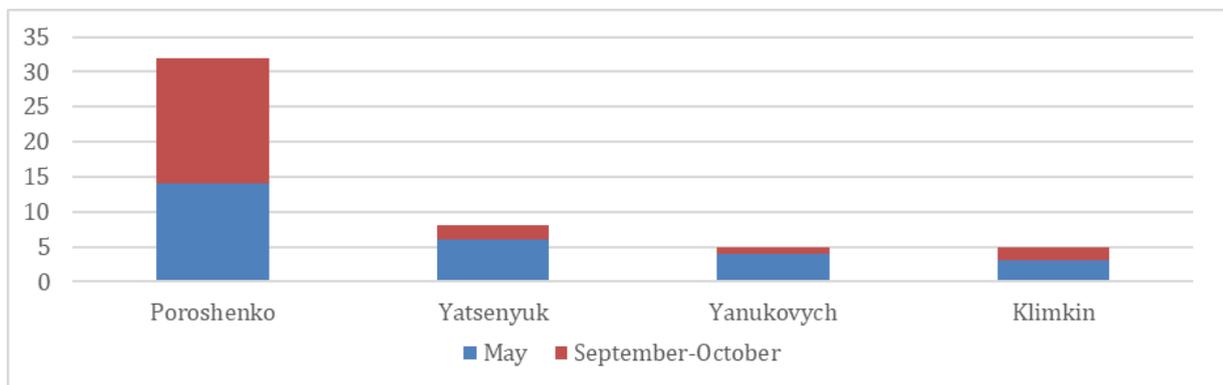


Figure 7 Number of articles that include Actor Ukraine officials

#### 4.4.3 Actorness (thematic frames) and Resonance combination

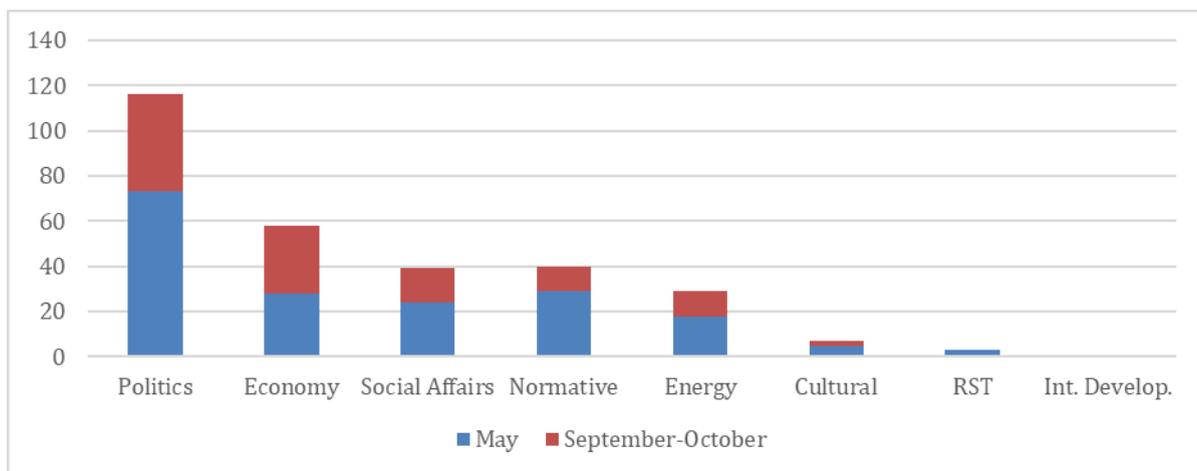
The outcomes of thematic frames of an actor, which represent the second indicator of the actorness criterion, will be explained in two steps: firstly, the thematic frames encoded as being associated with the EU, and secondly thematic frames associated with Ukraine will be presented. The explanation of the outcomes with regard to the thematic frames would also be supported by the emotionally charged conceptual metaphors, images and perceptions of the EU and Ukraine. This means that the results of the thematic frames of an actor and the fourth criterion, “Resonance” (evaluation of the EU and Ukraine, images and perceptions) will be combined. This

allows to directly explain how the thematic frames of the EU and Ukraine actors were emotionally charged in the Russian media.

#### **4.4.3.1 Actorness (thematic frames) and Resonance Combination (Actor EU)**

The EU and its actors were portrayed in the media in both internal and external political frames. The foreign policy areas cover economy, energy, negotiations on the Minsk Agreement, the Eastern Partnership initiative, Syrian intervention and EU refugee policy (Figure 8).

The majority of the economic frames concern sanctions against Russia. Here, the EU is criticized for imposing sanctions on Russia. According to the majority of the news reports, the EU was criticized for having been influenced by the US. A negative image of the EU, “which is not speaking with one voice”, was provided by controversial opinions on EU member states and their officials and business elites. On the one hand, articles about economic sanctions praised the formerly good economic relations with some EU member states and their interest in loosening the sanctions or their dissatisfaction with the EU’s maintenance of economic sanctions against Russia. On the other hand, it was pointed out that the negative effects of the sanctions would be greater for the EU than for Russia. The EU was portrayed as the real loser of sanctions against Russia. In general, Russian media was more careful with its images of the EU when it came to the topics of economy, and energy security and supply, in contrast to geopolitics. By these perceptions it is apparent that Russia had an interest in returning to cooperation with the EU.



*Figure 8 Frames (Actor EU)*

The framing of topics involving the EU's relations with Ukraine (with or without Russia) and the challenges of EU refugee policy were strengthened with images and perceptions. The refugee policy of the EU was used to depict the EU in Russian media as a weak actor that is unable to handle its own problems. Russia wanted to illustrate that the EU would similarly be unable to be a strong regional actor for Eastern Partnership countries. The Russian media used EU refugee policy and other internal EU issues (conflicts in the Balkan region, Brexit, etc.) as examples of a weak, deteriorating and overreaching EU. The negative perceptions and evaluations of the EU illustrate Russia’s intention to depict itself as a strong actor and capture the sole regional actor position. Here, one is to understand that although Russia wants stronger cooperation and economic ties with the EU, it does not want the EU and US to be present in former Soviet Republics or in the region as leading actors. At this point the articles were strengthened with examples about Russia’s capability or its investments (economically, culturally) in the countries of the former Soviet Republic, especially Ukraine.

The EU’s actors received more positive perceptions where the actions of the EU were found to reflect disappointment in the Ukrainian government. As an example, many Russian news

articles framed the EU as follows: “The EU has been ‘disappointed’ several times by the acts of Ukraine. It was gradually ‘disinterested in the Ukraine’ because the Ukraine did not comply with the obligations of the Minsk Agreement or was interested in a peaceful conflict resolution. That is why the EU sees Russia as a better negotiating partner than Ukraine” (Strokan 2015). In this context, Ukraine was evaluated negatively to strongly negatively, while the EU was regarded as neutral to positive. Russia presented itself as a better negotiation partner than Ukraine and evaluated itself positively. In coverage of the negotiation process, the Russian media portrayed the EU as a neutral mediator that is disappointed by Ukraine.

By contrast, the Eastern Partnership initiative was presented in some articles with very negative images of the EU. The negative images of the EU can be explained by Russia’s foreign policy aim of being the sole regional power, especially in the post-Soviet region (Stewart 2013: 65). Thus, the articles note that Russia does not regard the EU as a threat in the region. The Eastern Partnership is only attractive to the six partner countries because the EU provides financial resources. From a Russian perspective, the EaP is framed as a “non-serious” EU project and perceived as being ineffective. The countries from the region that are members of the EaP were also judged negatively (Chirkova 2015).

The EU’s role as a norm exporter is hardly perceived or barely recorded in the news media. The normative values of the EU are framed only within the scope of the Minsk Agreement where the EU is seen as a peacekeeper and promoter of stability in the region. Neither the extensive programs for democratization nor the EU as an international environmentalist are mentioned in the media. There is no coverage of the EU’s cultural and civil society in Russia in any of the three media outlets.

#### 4.4.3.2 Actorness (thematic frames) and Resonance combination (Actor Ukraine)

There are some initial similarities between the thematic frames connected to Ukrainian actors and EU samples.. Most topics were related to political issues (EaP, Minsk Agreement, etc.) (see Figure 9). Specific to news reports on Ukraine is that the majority of these articles address Ukraine itself (the Ukrainian government), social problems and the war in East Ukraine. Another specific point concerning Ukraine news articles is the negative emotional link to “normative” issues, which can also be found in almost all of the thematic frames (politics, economy, social affairs, etc.) (Ponomarov 2015a; 2015b; 2015c; 2015d; 2015e; 2015f). With the help of the examined criteria and indicators on Ukraine, a clear result is obtained from all three print media sources. Ukraine is evaluated negatively and as being unwilling to cooperate and disregarding normative values.

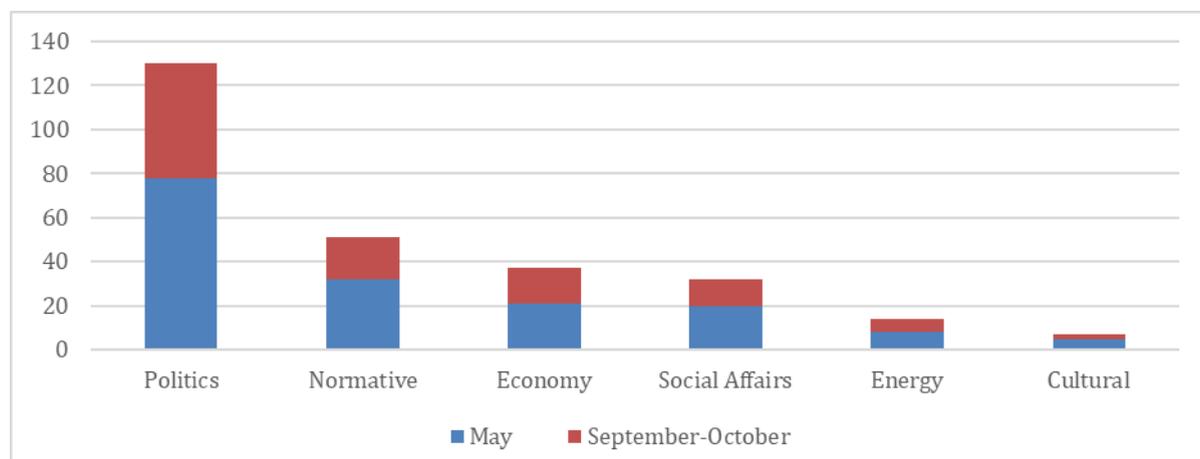


Figure 9 Frames (Actor Ukraine)

The new Ukrainian government is definitely not favoured by the Russian government, and this is also reflected in the Russian pro-government mass media. The extent of criticism directed against the Ukrainian government and its actions is excessive. The images and perceptions associated with the government of Ukraine and its foreign policy intentions in the Russian media concern its non-compromising and negative attitude towards Russia (Strokan 2015). Russia's perception of the Ukrainian economy and its energy debts to Russia is similarly negative. The government officials are presented as being corrupt and distant from the Ukrainian people.

In the Russian newspapers, the situation in the Ukraine's east is reported from the separatists' perspective. The separatists from the Donetsk and Lugansk regions of Ukraine are portrayed in a positive light. The Russian perception of them is that they are fighting for their freedom and autonomy from the government in Ukraine (Grishin 2015; Gamov 2015).

Adopting a different perspective, the articles often present the EU and Ukraine as "victims", "successors" and "marionettes" of the US. The media is hostile to the US, which is perceived to be instigating the unrest in the region. In several articles, the US is portrayed as a "devil" and "villain", which has drawn the Ukrainian government down the wrong path (Gamov 2015). The separatists mostly argue that the Euromaidan uprisings were organized solely by the US, to ensure that Ukraine loses Russia as a partner (Grishin 2015). Russia itself is portrayed here as a positive, strong actor that was always investing in and supporting Ukraine, "its little brother". Although the Russian-Ukrainian conflict was triggered by those in favour of Western integration and democratic reforms, which began in November 2013 and continued until February 2014, the EU is not perceived as a de-stabilizing force or the instigator of the Maidan demonstrations. It is interesting that Russia cast the US, and not the EU, in the enemy role as the instigator of the Maidan demonstrations. Ultimately, according to Russian media, the Maidan conflict was triggered by the US and corrupt Ukrainian officials, which did not reflect the will of the Ukrainian people.

It was also interesting to analyse how the EU and Ukraine are cast as actors in the articles related to Crimea. "In Russia, by contrast, the annexation was celebrated as the 'return to the fold of the motherland' or as 'accession'. This perspective is bolstered by dubious historical claims and a campaign of glorification, meant to legitimize the annexation in the eyes of the Russian population" (Baumann/Junginger 2017: 27). The conclusion is that Russia does not see Crimea as Ukrainian territory at all. The EU's criticism of the Crimean annexation is not supported in any of the three media sources. Russia's position is that at some point in the future, the EU should accept the Crimea as Russian territory. Russia will never return Crimea. If the resumption of relations between the EU and Russia continues to be linked to the return of the Crimea to Ukraine, there will be no solution in the long term.

#### **4.4.3.4 Conclusion Resonance EU and Ukraine**

Overall, the majority of the representations of the EU in the Russian media under investigation are assessed as neutral to negative (see Figure 10). The EU as a mediator in the Russia-Ukraine conflict was mostly perceived as neutral. My prediction is that after a possible loosening of the sanctions, the images will likely have a more positive character. The sanctions on Russia entailed a negative image of the EU but not certain member states. Regarding the theory of constructivism, it will still be difficult to assess whether Russia regards the EU as a friend (future economic ties, trade, energy policy, etc.) or an enemy (EaP, especially if there are closer ties with Ukraine in the future). The presentations and assessments of the EU differ considerably depending on the subject area. It is unclear whether the EU is perceived as a strong actor or as a "fragile unit" because of its challenges (refugee policy, Brexit, and disagreements among Member States).

In general, compared to the EU, it is noticeable that Ukraine is strikingly negatively portrayed in the media framing, evaluations and representations of its images and perceptions (see Figure 11). This is due to the unresolved conflicts between Russia and Ukraine and Russia's considerable geopolitical losses in the region. Neither Ukrainian government officials nor Ukrainian institutions were considered as being capable of acting. The negative images and perceptions of them can be seen in the terms "traitor", "liar" and "driver of conflict".

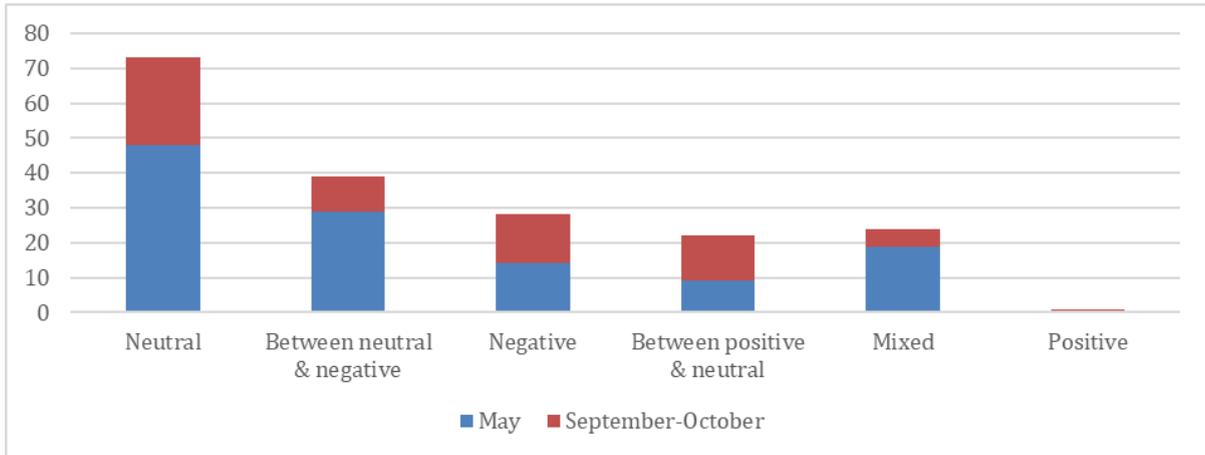


Figure 10 Evaluation of the EU and its actions

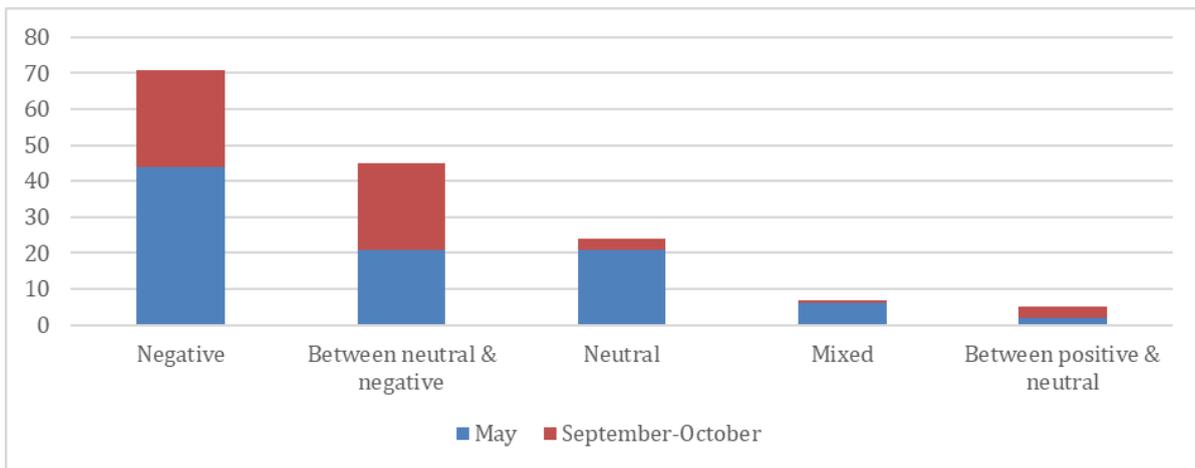


Figure 11 Evaluation of Ukraine and its actions

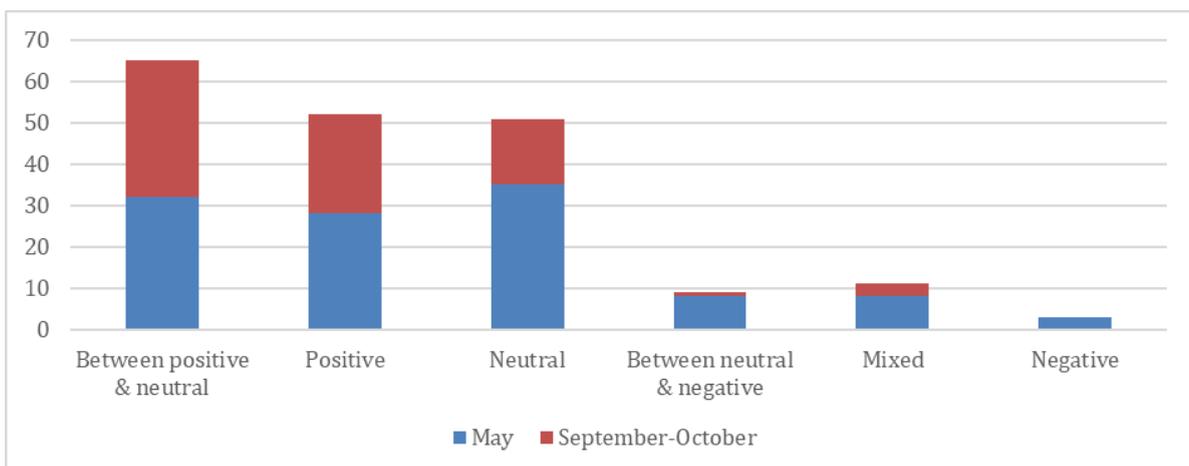


Figure 12 Evaluation of Russia itself and its actions

The future development of perceptions of the Ukrainian government and Ukraine as an actor is critical, as the development of Russian-Ukrainian relations might deteriorate further. I assume that regime change in Ukraine or at least a moderate political reorientation towards Russia would

produce the long-awaited resumption of Ukraine's membership in the post-Soviet club, with Russia again being a 'big brother' to its 'little brother' Ukraine.

The Russian media perceived as losers those who do not wish to cooperate with Russia (the EU on economic topics, Ukraine as a whole). Notwithstanding the difficult relations with the former 'brother' Ukraine, Russia plans to provide for peace and stability in the region. It supports the peaceful population of eastern Ukraine as well as all the Slavic minorities in the EU. Ultimately, Russia sees itself as a fair, strong regional actor that also tends to be an international actor. On the international scale, Russia is perceived to be able to provide considerable input, as it knows how to solve problems in Syria. The perceptions of Russia itself vary from neutral to very positive (Figure 12).

One of the most interesting insights is how media perceptions might differ from various perspectives. This could be made clear by comparing the three last Figures (10-12), which show how the external perception of one actor and its self-perception, or internal perception, can differ.

## **5. Conclusion**

The main question of the paper was how the Russian media perceives the EU and Ukraine. The selected analysis is intended to help the EU to better understand the relations with its neighbours and the consequences of its geopolitical activity, both regionally and globally, especially when relations amongst these actors are accompanied by political uncertainties and disagreements. The paper also offers insights over how Ukraine and the EU are considered to be crucial actors in Russian foreign policy and therefore visible in the Russian print media. The analysis has shown that the EU and Ukraine are perceived and evaluated differently in Russian mass media. While Ukraine is negatively portrayed in the Russian print media, the EU has a rather varying image, from negative to neutral. Russia itself is portrayed mostly positive.

Furthermore, it was also important to determine Russia's perceptions of the EU and Ukraine as actors in the region and in the world. Regarding topics related to the Minsk agreement, where the EU acts as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine, the EU is positioned alongside Russia as the second most important player in the region. Here, when playing its mediator role, the EU is evaluated neutrally. In addition to the EU being regarded as regionally significant, Germany and France, as well as their heads of state at the time (Merkel and Hollande), are presented as central actors.

Thus, the Russian side sees the EU as an intermediary and "neutral". However, there are also strong headwinds. The officials and institutions of the EU are hardly noticed. A lack of credibility on the part of the EU is reflected in the strong role played by individual member states. The fact that Russia prefers to negotiate only with some of the EU member states, which is publicly communicated, speaks of the EU's typical foreign policy dilemma, namely the lack of the EU to act as a strong and homogeneous actor. The EU received the most positive evaluation as a mediator, not as a normative or economic power and especially not as a geopolitical actor. The regional instrument of the EU - the EaP, is strongly criticized by the media to avoid the EU being perceived as a strong actor in the region. Simply reading between the lines, I identified in the Russian news media attention being paid to the challenges facing the EU (refugee policy or Brexit) accompanied by images of it being a "fragile unit", "slack club" and "over-stretched". The Russian media endeavours to demonstrate that Russia has the sole geopolitical claim in the region. This geopolitical claim could be detected in all the three specified print media and, also, in both periods. Thus, it offers an important hint about media and foreign policy correlation in Russia.

On the international scale, the EU receives much less attention than the US. The US was clearly more present in the media. In connection with international issues such as the United Nations General Assembly, terrorism, the crisis in Syria and so forth, the EU is only mentioned briefly in addition to the US and Russia. Evaluated news outlets showed that Russia is perceived as a capable and important actor in the international arena who strives for its multipolar position next to the US.

Returning to media perceptions of the Ukraine, Russia feels itself betrayed by the Ukrainian attempts to decouple itself from Russia, especially, the Ukrainian government efforts to look for a new political orientation towards the EU and US. Therefore, Ukraine is perceived as negative mainly in connection with the Ukrainian government and its head of state, Poroshenko. Russia's aggravation about the Ukraine and its government can be observed in the Russian media framing with mostly negative aspects or stories about Ukraine. It is shown as a weak, traitorous and lying actor. Hence, this is protruding Ukraine as a destabilizer for the corresponding region.

The blame for the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine is attributed to the US and the new Ukrainian government. The EU is not considered responsible for the outbreak of the conflicts in Ukraine in the Russian media. It must be mentioned that the Maidan riots and the period of the Association Agreement and outbreak of the Maidan crisis are not framed as much as I had assumed that they would be. Russia is not portrayed as responsible for the war in East Ukraine. Russian print media upholds the statement that it supports Ukrainian people in East Ukraine and understands their aim to be independent from Ukraine and from the Ukrainian government. It can be confirmed that the Russian foreign policy with its claim to be the sole geopolitical power in the region is mirrored in its media too. Media perceptions analysis suggests that the negative image of Ukraine will continue until Ukraine turns its back to the West and seeks closer cooperation with Russia again.

Ukrainian and EU samples cite Russia as not only being the leading regional, but also an important international actor. Ukraine is noted by Russia as a "non-crucial" conflict when it comes to international key issues such as the ones pertaining towards Syria and terrorism. Here Russia is portrayed as a strong and capable actor and gains more attention in Russian press compared to the other two actors.

The results of our analysis of Russian media perceptions depict that Russian media outlets are in line with current Russian foreign policy, delivering a positive image of Russia along with strong images and perceptions of pro-Russian arguments. Further research in this field would be helpful to analyse the changing line of Russian policy and Russian media towards the EU and Ukraine.

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