

Framing of Crimean Annexation and Eastern Ukraine Conflict in Newspapers of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in 2014

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Abstract

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This chapter analyses the framing of annexation of Crimea by Russian Federation in March 2014 and conflict in Eastern Ukraine during the spring of 2014 in newspapers of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The focus is in possible linkage of Crimean annexation to relations between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia, including the possibility of similar annexation of Northern Kazakhstan, which has large Russian majority. Findings include that the amount of coverage is rather small in official, state-published or sponsored newspapers while in privately owned newspapers, the amount and spectrum of coverage is wider. It seems also that (especially in Kazakhstan) the Kazakh-language papers are less controlled by the officials and therefore more varied in their views than Russian-language papers. In some private newspapers, the similarities of Northern Kazakhstan and Crimea are discussed while the state media report only the official version that the annexation is against international law but that the people of Crimea also have right to organize a referendum. In Kyrgyzstan, the coverage has broadly the same pattern, Kyrgyz-language privately owned newspapers being the most varied and critical in their views towards Russian policy in Ukraine.

Introduction

Central Asia faces similar challenges of democratization after a long era of authoritarian rule, as do many other developing countries. Civic unrest is a problem for many developing countries that face challenges caused by ethnic conflicts or political disagreement. The media can play a central role in either spreading these conflicts or promoting peaceful solutions (on cases related to Kyrgyzstan, see, for example, Freedman 2009 and Kulikova 2008). The article focuses on media's role in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan public discussion around Crimea in spring 2014. Thus, the article adds to the existing research literature creating

new insights for understanding the role of media in process of social transformation in post-Communist conditions.

Inspired by Nabers' (2015) approach to framing global politics in the "crisis and change" paradigm, we look at the crisis around Crimea in 2014 as a possible catalyst of social changes in these Central Asian societies. Nabers' approach is based on the four interrelated and mutually constitutive elements: sedimented practices and dislocation on the one hand, as well as antagonism and the institutionalization within a so-called imaginary on the other. We also build up on Nabers' conceptualization of critical discourse analysis as an interrelation between the discourse and linguistics. As Nabers asserts, "language no longer remains a neutral linguistic system but acquires the status of a scheme of socially regulated values of good and bad, strong and weak. The signifier 'worker' acquires no meaning as long as it is not linked to another signifier, for example, 'wage,' 'woman,' 'children,' 'German' or 'British.' It is only via the relationship between different signifiers that mutual integration, and the establishment of a chain of equivalences, becomes possible" (Nabers 2015: 135).

While the overall historical context of the Central Asia media has been elaborated in a number of studies (Freedman 2012; Juraev 2002; Junisbai 2011; Junisbai et al. 2015; Kulikova and Perlmutter 2007; Mambetaliev 2006; Kulikova and Ibraeva 2002), a number of academics have pointed out the lack of academic research of the post-Soviet media systems—even though the number of studies on individual ex-Soviet countries and regions is growing (Freedman and Shafer 2014). However, they have drawn the conclusion that, after a relatively short period of vibrant media development, the process of building independent institutions of the Fourth Estate came to a halt.

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This chapter examines how the process where Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 was reported in the Kazakh and Kyrgyz press and if the security perceptions offered in the media outlets depended on the different language or ownership background of the outlet. In both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, in addition to Kazakh- and Kyrgyz-language media, outlets operating in Russian language such as TV, radio stations and newspapers are widely available and are among nationally important news media. The main questions addressed are how the newspapers wrote on the Crimea events of 2014 and how they described the reasons behind Russian intervention, and gave comparisons with other similar situations and prognosis. The main hypothesis is that the situation is framed in more pro-Russian way in the editions of Russian-language media outlets compared to publications printed in Kyrgyz and Kazakh languages and that the coverage in state-owned publications is more inclined towards official statements of the state officials and thus presenting hegemonic processes.

Our sample includes newspapers published in February–April 2014, which gives us an opportunity to look at how the development of Crimea-related events was covered while they were ongoing, as well as reactions and reflections in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan soon after the annexation. For this chapter, we combine elements of framing analysis and discourse analysis. The discourse analysis helps to track patterns and main storylines in the reporting, as well as differences in reporting of different outlets. We also look at the difference between locally published Kazakh/Kyrgyz-language and Russian-language newspapers, and Kazakh/Kyrgyz editions of Russian-language newspapers.

The research material was gathered by choosing all articles (news items, analysis, etc.) in a selection of newspapers in the given time frame of 1 February–30 April 2014 including word Crimea in any form. We utilized also a list of keywords (democracy, democratization, freedom, revolution, civil society, conflict, demonstration, Crimea, Russia, West, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine) to see if some topics are of greater interest. In the analysis, also the main framing function (as described by Entman 1993: 52) was identified. According to Entman, framing is "selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman 1993: 52). Frames are constructed through the strategic use or omission of certain words and phrases. Entman suggested that frames in news can be examined and identified by "the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments" (Entman 1993: 52). Thus, in our analysis, we aim to discuss what are the main topics, or problems raised in

the context of Crimean annexation, what causes the media stories give for these problems, if there are moral judgements, and if the media stories offer and justify treatments of the problem or predict their likely effects.

Kazakh and Kyrgyz Media

Since Kazakhstan gained independence, the number of media outlets operating in the country has grown dramatically. In the late 1980s, the total number of registered media outlets only included ten republic-level printed media and twenty-one TV and radio channels. In July 2016, the total number of registered media outlets at all levels was 2763, including 1156 newspapers and 1269 magazines (Ministry of Information and Communications 2017). The Agency for Public Service and Anti-Corruption, interestingly, provides rather different statistics in 2016: according to them, there are 1364 newspapers and 522 magazines, out of which 24 and 33%, respectively, are state-owned. Thus, the state in Kazakhstan remains a significant player in the media market. The language in which the media outlets operate remains a very important factor for defining political orientation of a particular outlet in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In Kazakhstan in May 2013, 344 media outlets operated in only Kazakh, 758 in only Russian, 727 in both Kazakh and Russian, and 282 in Kazakh, Russian and other languages, which suggests presence of two major linguistic realms in the media industry.

As part of a larger Central Asian sociocultural and sociopolitical entity, the Kyrgyzstani press system adapted many traits of the Soviet model imposed during seventy years of Communist ideology (Freedman and Shafer 2011: 2). In the post-Soviet period, significant changes in ownership occurred and part of the media outlets became privately owned. Nowadays public, state-run, private as well as international media coexist in Kyrgyzstan.¹ State sovereignty led not just to the development of independent from the state media outlets but also to the new language policy in the media sphere. Kyrgyzstan as a multi-ethnic country with large Russian and Uzbek minorities adopted a bilingual system of Kyrgyz and Russian. As Russian was the dominating language during the Soviet era, the positions of Kyrgyz language were enhanced through a special law that required transmitting at least 50% of all TV and radio programming in Kyrgyz (Kyrgyz Public Television and Radio Corporation law).² Taking into consideration that 85% of the population (5.1 million citizens) of Kyrgyzstan in 2016 were Internet users (National Sustainable Development Strategy for the Kyrgyz Republic for the period 2013–2017), we may conclude that news websites or their information reproduced through social networks gains appeal among a wide readership. Since 2010, there have been fewer legal cases against the press and fewer attacks against journalists than in previous years. However, the government occasionally pressures outlets for coverage of certain issues while most media outlets that are anxious to avoid trouble with the government and political forces order their journalists to frame coverage in certain ways.

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Crimean Crisis

The Crimean crisis erupted in the aftermath of a violent regime change in Ukraine in late February 2014 in context of which President Yanukovich left Kyiv on February 22. Shortly after these events, armed soldiers without any identification badges or insignia started to appear on the streets of several cities in Crimea. They quickly established control over key administrative buildings in the Crimean capital, Simferopol, and blocked the Ukrainian military bases stationed in the peninsula. The soldiers refused to talk to journalists and remained silent, while continuing to secure access to major governmental buildings, police and military stations and were quickly labelled “Polite Men.” The Crimean assembly gathered and, allegedly under pressure from the military, voted in favour of holding a referendum on joining Russian Federation. The referendum was held on March 16, 2014 in Crimea and was largely criticized internationally as illegal. The Russian official discourse, however, implied that the military deployment was done in order to protect the Russian-speaking population of Crimea, many of whom were Russian citizens (mainly in Sevastopol). On March 18, 2014, Russian President Putin signed the bill on inclusion of Crimea to the Russian Federation. There were numerous criticisms of the way the plebiscite was organized and most countries refused to consider it legal. In our research, we look at how the discourses were built in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, countries with a remarkable Russian media supply. In what follows, we describe our approach to analysis of the media coverage of the Crimean events in both Kazakh and Kyrgyz media outlets.

Coverage of Crimean Events in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

The media outlets play two major societal roles. First, media have the “agenda-setting” capacity in their respective societies by informing their audiences and shaping their perceptions of certain issues by framing/interpreting news in a positive or negative fashion. As a generator of discourses, media, as also Nabers (2015) puts it, frames global politics in the “crisis and change” paradigm. Second, the media also largely reflect the broader societal stances towards certain issues, by following their audiences’ preferences (at least how they perceive them).

The research on foreign news has indicated that trade between countries is the principal predictor of news coverage about foreign countries in most of the countries and that geographic distance and population of a country play a significant role in the developing countries while in developed countries GDP is an exclusive predictor of news coverage (Wu 2003: 19–20). Pietiläinen (2006: 226) stated that both the foreign news and the foreign trade of individual countries depend on geographic, political and cultural proximity, historical connections and many other factors and in many cases these factors result in a similar distribution of both trade and news. Not only the news flows in quantitative terms but also their content is largely dependent on cultural and political ties between countries, which may also change when political changes happen. Therefore, the study of Crimean crisis in Central Asian media is extremely interesting: just few decades ago all the countries were part of the same empire, and now Russian and Ukrainian versions of the conflict are very different. Therefore, it is interesting to see how the case is framed in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan Media Under Research

We chose four Kazakhstan’s nationwide print newspapers with the largest circulation size for purpose of this project: *Egemen Qazaqstan* [Independent Kazakhstan] and *Zhas Alash* [Young Alash] which are published in Kazakh language, and *Kazakhstanskaia Pravda* [Truth of Kazakhstan] and *Vremia* [Time], which represent the Russian-language segment. *Kazakhstanskaia Pravda* and *Egemen Qazaqstan* are government-owned nationwide newspapers that usually express the regime’s officially sanctioned views on political and social issues in Kazakhstan. They were both created in the early 1920s and build up on a legacy of the official papers of the Communist Party of Soviet Kazakhstan. In the post-independence period, both of these papers remained being government newspapers, albeit having adjusted their practices in order to appear as genuine newspapers and not ideological messengers. These newspapers also possess largest circulation figures in Kazakhstan—circulation of *Kazakhstanskaia Pravda* in 2017 is estimated at approximately 100,000 copies, while *Egemen Qazaqstan* has more than 200,000 copies. *Vremia* and *Zhas Alash* represent an opposite segment—both of these papers are privately owned, and, as such, possess a greater degree of freedoms when it comes to voice societal concerns *vis-à-vis* certain issues. *Zhas Alash* leans towards the stances of the Kazakh-speaking intelligentsia, including those with rather nationalist views; and its circulation size is estimated at 50,000 copies. *Vremia* is under the patronage of the state-owned corporation, Kazakhmys, but managed to preserve its quasi-independent editorial policies and its circulation is approximately 180,000 copies.

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The material regarding Kyrgyzstan follows the same pattern: We analysed privately owned *Alibi* and state-backed *Kyrgyz Tuusu* printed in Kyrgyz language; and privately owned *Vecherniy Bishkek* and state-controlled *Slovo Kirgizstana* published in Russian language. *Alibi* is a privately owned Kyrgyz-language newspaper, which is published once a week. It has a circulation of 10,000 copies, and the main audience is Kyrgyz-speaking audience living in regions. *Kyrgyz Tuusu* is a state-owned Kyrgyz-language newspaper, and it is published twice a week. It has 15,000 copies of circulation, and it is mainly read by Kyrgyz-speaking audiences. *Slovo Kirgizstana* is state-owned Russian-language newspaper and comes out twice a week. It has Russian-speaking audience living in capital city and regions. The circulation is 15,000. *Vecherniy Bishkek* is published twice a week and is privately owned. The circulation is 150,000. The readers consist of local Russian-speakers living in the capital city and rural areas.

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News Coverage in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

In our analysis, it came clear that the coverage of state-owned or state-sponsored media differed from that of the independent publication. Also, the language question had influence.

Domestic Developments in Ukraine

Substantial focus of the coverage of the Crimean crisis was in Kazakh press dedicated to the analysis of the domestic crisis in Ukraine and Yanukovich's overthrow after several weeks of protests and violent riots in the late February 2014. In general, the state-sponsored papers embraced the narrative that was part of the Kazakhstan's regime discourse about primacy of the economic reforms before political liberalization. Kazakhstan's officials, starting from the President Nazarbayev, at many occasions have mentioned the "Economy first, then politics" principle, largely trying to replicate the Southeast Asian paternalistic transitional models, inspired by Singapore, Malaysia and Taiwan. The regime's discourse tried to portray cases of Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine and Georgia and regime changes there as failures, specifically due to the violation of this principle and overpolitization of societies. For example, in an article called "Ukraine: The Impact of Crisis," the state-backed *Egemen Qazaqstan* narrates about the Yanukovich overthrow and connects the regime collapse with the overpolitization of the country. The journalists shared their impressions from a recent trip to Ukraine:

The Ukrainian society has become too politically aggressive and has turned into an arena for the struggle of political parties for power. In such situations, no one will ever pay attention to the economy. During our recent trip to Ukraine, we were amazed by the richness of the natural resources of the country, which was highly developed in the Soviet era. But we've also seen bad roads, poor houses and dark streets. The fact that Ukraine's GDP per capita is only \$7,000, while the country has so much wealth and sits in the middle of Europe, tells us something. But they have a lot of political parties pulling people to their sides, using newspapers and TV channels. That is why all people talked about was the party they wanted to see in power. (*Egemen Qazaqstan*, 26 February 2014)

The state-backed papers repeatedly mentioned Ukraine's economic troubles in the aftermath of the Yanukovich overthrow and Crimea annexation. Russian-language state-backed paper *Kazakhstanskaia Pravda* also highlighted Ukraine's economic troubles. In an article called "Ukraine-2014: Chronicle of Events," the paper narrates about economic consequences of the Yanukovich overthrow and suggests that the country might declare default. Interestingly, the paper also mentions that tourism in Crimea (still controlled by Ukraine at the moment of printing) was also to be affected by the economic slowdown. (*Kazakhstanskaia Pravda*, 1 March 2014)

Zhas Alash, being a privately run newspaper associated with the Kazakh intelligentsia and nationalist circles, takes a more critical and anti-Yanukovich position in the discourse, but also draws similarities to Kazakhstan. For instance, in an article called "It is Possible to Seize Power from the Hands of one Person," published right after Yanukovich was ousted, the newspaper says:

Yanukovich said he does not want to leave power. He said on the TV: "I am legally elected president. I will not resign. This decision [of the Supreme Rada] is illegal." Yanukovich clearly reminds us the former Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek BaKyiv. He also did not want to leave the power, yet he fled to Belarus. What has Yanukovich left behind? Yanukovich wants Ukraine to be divided into two. The situation in Ukraine is a lesson for our government. (*Zhas Alash*, 25 February 2014)

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Crimea Annexation

The Crimea annexation by Russian troops put Kazakhstan into a very challenging position. Kazakhstan does preserve close relations with Russia, yet at the same time, a clear violation of the international law made Kazakhstan feel vulnerable against potential attacks from Russia, given the demographics of Northern Kazakhstan. The state-backed papers reflected the regime's position on these developments, remaining prudent and only publishing short notices regarding the Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements. For instance, *Egemen Qazaqstan*, in an article called "Putin has signed documents recognizing independence of Crimea" (*Egemen Qazaqstan*, 18 March 2014), narrates in a very neutral tone that Crimea has been incorporated into Russian Federation after the formal recognition of its independence, the submission of a petition to join the Russian Federation, followed by the formal approval by the Russia's State Duma.

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Similarly, state-owned *Kazakhstanskaia Pravda*'s was careful and neutral. The paper initially reported about the intervention to Crimea by quoting Ukrainian officials, such as Minister of Interior Avakov. He stated that "the Government of Crimea reported that its building has been occupied, the Ministry of Interior deploys troops and police forces" (*Kazakhstanskaia Pravda*, 27 February 2014). The paper went on to add "Ministry of Interior of Ukraine accused Russia in the armed intervention to Crimea" (*Kazakhstanskaia Pravda*, 28 February 2014). The paper finally looked at Ukraine in mid-March when it printed a statement by the MFA of Kazakhstan regarding the situation in Crimea. The statement itself caused many criticisms, as it included three paragraphs, two of which seemed to contradict each other:

Kazakhstan confirms its commitment to the fundamental principles of the international law and UN Charter [...] Kazakhstan considered the referendum in Crimea as a free expression of the will of the population of this autonomous republic and understands the decision of the Russian Federation in the existing conditions. (*Kazakhstanskaia Pravda*, 19 March 2014)

This statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was criticized domestically: *Zhas Alash* printed an article called "It Would Have Been Better to Remain Silent rather than Making a Statement in Support of Russia":

While the international community condemns Russia's involvement in the Crimea, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan said "it considers the decision of the Russian Federation with understanding..." The official statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the issue of Crimea, which has caused a crisis between Russia and the West, was confusing. One of the experts said that through this statement, Kazakhstan was supporting Russia, and one of the experts said it's a sign that the Aqorda was shocked by Russia's involvement. (*Zhas Alash*, 20 March 2014)

Only later, when the situation started to explode in the Eastern parts of Ukraine, the state-backed Kazakh paper *Egemen Qazaqstan* took a more critical position towards the Donetsk and Luhansk referendums, while admitting the controversy of the issue. The article tried to present both sets of views, pro-separatist and pro-Kyiv, while somewhat inclining to support the latter (*Egemen Qazaqstan*, 13 May 2014).

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The private newspapers were much less limited in expressing their position vis-à-vis the Crimea situation. The *Zhas Alash*, private Kazakh-language newspaper, was the most vocal in the discourse regarding Crimea annexation. In their discourse, the paper criticized both the Russian occupationist policy and how Kazakhstan's government handled the situation. For instance, in an article called "Kazakhstan did not assess Russian occupationist policy," the paper expressed criticism of the Kazakhstan's diplomatic approach and said that "while criticizing Russia's aggressive policy, Western states are considering applying anti-Moscow measures, and Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev has left for Moscow to discuss the situation in Ukraine" (*Zhas Alash*, 6 March 2014). The newspaper further mentioned that Kazakhstan should have taken a more proactive stance on this and express solidarity with Ukraine. Russian involvement in the staging the referendum in Crimea was also mentioned by the paper: in an article called "Russia's involvement in Crimea is now obvious," the paper argues:

The result of the referendum that took place within three weeks after the capture of the Crimean parliament building by armed men without distinctive marks is not surprising. Since the fall of Yanukovich, Russia has deployed 14,000 troops in Crimea. The United States has said it will not recognize the referendum conducted under "the pressure of the Russian army." The Crimean Tatars, who have long opposed Russia's accession, have announced a boycott to the referendum. (*Zhas Alash*, 18 March 2014)

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In Kyrgyzstan, a private newspaper *Alibi* gave a platform for both pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian voices. The information sources for *Alibi* were both local pro-Russian and pro-Western political experts and government statements of both Russia and Ukraine. *Alibi* did not refer to Kyrgyz government's official position on Crimean issue neither stating Ministry of Foreign Affairs nor the Kyrgyz government. State newspapers in Kyrgyzstan took pro-Russian position on annexation of Crimea, while also being rather silent on the issue. Kyrgyz-language state-owned newspaper *Kyrgyz Tuusu* published only one article on Crimean issue. *Kyrgyz Tuusu* in an article called "Protesting people, growing army" (*Kyrgyz Tuusu*, 18 March 2014, no. 19) narrated in a pro-Russian position by stating Mihailov, a Russian politician:

Look at recent history. Crimea was before part of Russia. The reason why it was given to Ukraine is the political blindness of the first secretary of Communist Party at that time Nikita Hrushtshov and after before the collapse of Soviet Union of Boris Yeltsin.....There is a situation in Kyiv and regions of Ukraine which is turning into an anarchy. Current Kyiv government has just remembered the legacy of Soviet Union which was given to it after the collapse of USSR and started suing Russia by blaming it. (*Kyrgyz Tuusu*, 18 March 2014, no. 19)

The author of the article mentioned the geopolitical confrontations of big powers over the Crimean issue:

Because there are interests of big powers and geopolitical confrontations behind the issue of returning Crimea to Russia which is making this issue popular. It seems that the confrontations of Russia, EU and US will not end soon. (*Kyrgyz Tuusu*, 18 March 2014, no. 19)

Another state-owned, but Russian-language newspaper *Slovo Kirgizstana* also wrote about the results of the referendum in Crimea. In the article “Crimea will become a part of Russia” from 18 March 2014, *Slovo Kirgizstana* refers to Mikhail Malishev, the head of referendum commission in Crimea:

About 96.77% of residents voted on Sunday at a referendum for the entry of autonomy into the Russian Federation.....Referendum asked two questions, “Are you for the reunification of the Crimea with Russia as a subject of the Russian Federation?” and “Are you for the restoration of the Constitution of the Republic of Crimea in 1992 and for the status of the Crimea as part of Ukraine?.” In turn, most of the observers from 20 countries of the world who came to Crimea noted the absence of any irregularities in the voting. (*Slovo Kirgizstana*, 18 March 2014)

Slovo Kirgizstana published a news article “Republic Crimea is a federal subject of Russia” in 21 March 2014 where the author narrates that Crimea was rejoined to Russia, concerns why West doesn't accept. Russian view not problematized. Practical consequences for Crimeans, e.g. taking Russian position in the use in Crimea. The same author Irina Koshova published another news article “No way back” in the next issue of *Slovo Kirgizstana* from 25 March 2014 where she uses the narrative “self-proclaimed Republic of Crimea” and narrates that “The State Duma of the Russian Federation ratified the Treaty on the accession of the Crimea and Sevastopol to the Russian Federation. Earlier, representatives of the self-proclaimed Republic of Crimea and President Vladimir Putin signed an agreement on this.” (*Slovo Kirgizstana*, 25 March 2014). The author also noted that Kyrgyzstan supported Russian Federation on annexation of Crimea and recognized the legitimacy of the referendum in Crimea:

It is worth noting that Russia's actions to annex Crimea sharply criticized the West. Also do not consider the referendum to be legitimate Ukraine, all EU countries, including usually standing alone in Great Britain (total of 28 states), Canada, Japan, South Korea, Iceland and Turkey. But still there are states that supported the Russian Federation: Kazakhstan, Abkhazia, Belarus, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan in its statement expressed its opinion that the results of the referendum in the Crimea represent the will of the absolute majority of the population of the Crimea. A few more states do not say anything about the signed agreement yet, but the Crimean referendum: Venezuela, North Korea (DPRK), Syria is considered legitimate. (*Slovo Kirgizstana*, 25 March 2014)

Geopolitical Game of World Powers

Alibi, a privately run Kyrgyz-language newspaper, took a rather neutral position in the coverage of Crimean crisis—largely like *Zhas Alas* in Kazakhstan. In its pages, the newspaper criticized both the Russian occupationist policy and Western countries' regime handling the situation. For instance, in an article called “Crimea: The Conflict of the Century” the paper expressed criticism of Russia and said:

First of all the peninsula Crimea which N. Hryushev gave to Ukraine in 1954 and which is the gate to the Black sea is very important for Russia and for all world powers who are interested in this region. That is why Russia is holding its “Black Sea navy” here by paying 97 million USD annually. In spite of this as this territory is a part of Ukrainian territory, it is evaluated by world community as an invasion to Ukrainian

territory....The fact that President Vladimir Putin got the approval of Federal Council to send its military weapons to the peninsula of Ukraine Crimea is scaring the world community. (*Alibi*, 4 March 2014, no. 15)

In the same article, the paper also criticized the Western countries and stating that “Western countries are trying to include Ukraine to EU and supporting nationalists like Stepan Bandera’s generation in Ukraine” (*Alibi*, 4 March 2014, no. 15). Russian-language private newspaper *Vecherniy Bishkek* in an article “Peninsula Crimea” from 18 March 2014 also narrated about the geopolitical game in the region:

The step of the American side can only be explained by an irresistible desire to maximally politicize an already difficult situation, in order to satisfy its geopolitical interests, to continue to increase internationally around Ukraine. (*Vecherniy Bishkek*, 18 March 2014)

Building up on similar narrative, a number of articles in Kazakh media, too, were dedicated to the further implications and consequences of the Ukrainian crisis for Kazakhstan. As Kazakhstan was about to sign a Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) Treaty at the end of May of 2014, many voiced their concerns of enhancing any cooperation with Russia further after the Crimea crisis. *Zhas Alash*, for instance, narrated about anti-Eurasian movement, which brought together several prominent opposition leaders, nationalists and pro-Western activists. In an article called “Let’s Stop the Kremlin!” the newspaper in its editorial article emotionally called to manifest against the signing of the EEU, which was scheduled for the late May 2014. The newspaper argued:

The decision of the Russian President Vladimir Putin to send the Russian troops to the independent, sovereign, Ukrainian territory undermined the international community and the world. Having violated the 1994 Budapest Treaty, UN documents and all human moral principles, and using “protection of Russia and Russian citizens” as an excuse for using force against Kyiv, the Putin’s regime is turning into a fascist nature and is ready to commit crimes against humanity! Can we be allies with such a state? The international community can block and sanction any aggression of a fascist regime. The Russian leadership is overwhelmed by the great Russian chauvinism and imperial ambitions. If Russia attacks Ukraine today, there is no guarantee that tomorrow the Russians will not incorporate the northern regions of Kazakhstan! (*Zhas Alash*, 4 March 2014)

Interestingly, the paper interviewed Sergei Duvanov, a prominent Kazakhstani journalist and formerly an opposition activist. *Zhas Alash* rarely invites ethnic Russian opinion-makers to be interviewed on its pages; this perhaps represents that pro-Western and Kazakh nationalist groups’ interests overlapped when being juxtaposed against the Russian annexation of Crimea. In his interview to *Zhas Alash* Duvanov said:

I recently visited four Ukrainian cities: Kyiv, Odessa, Nikolaev and Kharkov. My goal was not to meet with famous politicians or public figures, but rather to talk to ordinary people. I talked to people at the train stations, shops, buses, cafes, hotels, all the places I went through. I concluded that there is no fascism in Ukraine, and this is just Putin’s propaganda. True, there are some nationalists, including radicals. But show me a country that doesn’t have this kind of people. These people have no influence on the policies of the present government. (*Zhas Alash*, 27 March 2014)

Another article about anti-Eurasian movement in *Zhas Alash*—called “If We Were Talking about Saving Our State”—narrates further about challenges that await Kazakhstan in the EEU. The paper narrated about surveys that were conducted in Ukraine before conflict, in which even in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, more than 80% expressed their loyalty to Russia rather than Ukraine. The paper says:

Are there any such surveys in the northern Kazakhstan? No, of course. And if there were, it would not be impossible to imagine that more than half of Petropavlovsk, Pavlodar and Kostanai residents would choose Russia over Kazakhstan. We should avoid danger. We need to be careful about the situation. What do people living on the border with Russia think about? Do they consider Kazakhstan as their homeland? What do we need to do in order to make them not pro-Russian, but our fellow countrymen, pro-Kazakhstan? (*Zhas Alash*, 27 March 2014)

The excerpt above reflects a sense of insecurity felt in identity terms, in rather direct way. The anti-Eurasian forum gathered in Almaty on April 12, 2014. *Zhas Alash* published the resolution issued by the Forum. By some accounts, this was a substantial mobilization of people around anti-Eurasianist agenda; yet, the critics said it failed to attract a mass support and only managed to get a few hundred people on board. The paper expressed viewpoint that all agreements and documents should be openly published and that “It is impossible to join any alliance with Russia when the Russian army invaded Ukraine and annexed the Crimea with an illegal referendum” (15 April 2014).

Historical References

Part of the media coverage used historical references and combined them with current topics. Kyrgyz *Alibi* the last words of S. Miloshevitch on the position of Russians and Yugoslavia, in a statement on information war between Russia and the West (*Alibi*, 4 March 2014, no. 15). At the same issue of the newspaper, another article was published on Crimean issue “Nationalists came to the power in Ukraine.” In this interview with a local political expert Toktogul Kakchekeev on annexation of Crimea, the expert took a pro-Russian position.

In a short note “Is Putin an enemy of Ukraine?” from 25 March 2014, no. 21, *Alibi* writes about ex-prime minister of Ukraine Yulia Timoshenko’s reaction to annexation of Crimea:

After the annexations of Crimea Ukrainians are hating Russia. Ex-prime minister of Ukraine Yulia Timoshenko who was recently let free from jail declared on Ukrainian TV Channels that “the number one enemy of Ukraine is Putin.” Besides this she also declared that “as Putin could not take over the Crimea with political pressures, he was ought to take it with military power. However eventually Ukraine will return Crimea to its own territory. (*Alibi*, 25 March 2014, no. 21)

Russian involvement in the staging the referendum in Crimea was also mentioned by the paper: in an interview with Tursunbek Akun, public Ombudsman who was an observer from Kyrgyzstan during the referendum in Crimea titled “Even if we blame Putin, he did not lie,” from 1 April 2014, the paper refers to Tursunbek Akun’s following statement:

70% of population of Crimea are Russians that is why mostly they showed up during referendum. And Ukrainians in Crimea showed up very few. And Tatars who are 14% of the population did not show up at all. And their votes were falsified, because the information that 97% of population showed up at referendum is not true at all. Tatars not only did not show up, but also did not assign an observer at elections. As all members of the commission were Russians, they did what they want. All these are violations of law. Russians brought to Crimea about 30 000 army and the border was protected by Chechens. One more thing to mention is that, they already hang the Russian flag before the referendum. At night on 26 February to 27 February, unknown people seized Crimean Rada (Parliament) and the next day they brought deputies and made them to sign an independence declaration. Of course, all these happened with the pressure of Russia. Crimea belonged to Russia before, which is why Russia returned its land by using power. (*Alibi*, 1 April 2014, no. 23)

AQ12

The Ombudsman continues by expressing his pro-Russian view and criticizing Barack Obama and supporting Putin:

Even if we blame Putin, he did not lie at all. He is doing it openly and talking about it openly. And Barack Obama is bombing Syria, providing weapons to its opposition, destroyed Iraq and Libya and lying that he did not do it all. In general Putin’s position is right. He is building an alternative to US who is trying to build its dominance in the world. (*Alibi*, 1 April 2014, no. 23)

In the Russian-language state-owned newspaper *Slovo Kirgizstana*, only four articles were dedicated to annexation of Crimea over the period between 1 February and 30 April 2014. One of the stories was an interview with local political expert and director of Political Research Foundation in Kyrgyzstan. The story, “Anxiety and pain are common,” was based on material in Vesti.kg from 5 March 2014. The interviewee talked in the interview how Kyrgyzstanis, “who survived the two revolutions, understand the Euro-Maidan

passions.” This quote shows proximity to the events in the post-Soviet region. The expert also mentioned the information war between Russia and the West and expressed his anxiety that parallel to Ukrainian protests the local Kyrgyz opposition will also try to shake the situation in Kyrgyzstan. The expert took pro-Russian position by stating that

What was happening in Ukraine did not leave indifferent any of the residents in the post-Soviet space. Kyrgyzstan cannot be related to this conflict. However, in the event of a situation out of control, we must find ourselves on the Russian side, considering our relations with the Russian Federation, including within the framework of the CSTO. In any case, we should pray for Ukraine and hope that the parties will be able to find a sound force and come to a consensus on this issue. (*Slovo Kirgizstana*, 5 March 2014)

AQ13

Annexation of Crimea as a threat of Russia’s territorial emancipation to Central Asia.

In an article “Will we lose our land together with our people?” from 22 April 2014, the author of a story in *Alibi* writes about “separate and govern” policy of Russia towards Ukraine. The author named his subtitle “Russia took over the Crimea, who is next...” (*Alibi*, 22 April 2014, no. 21). The author asked questions like “Will Ukrainian crisis repeat in Kyrgyzstan in the future?” and “What is the intention of Russia?” and tried to answer them by stating the following:

Putin said that one of the two world camps during “cold war” NATO is still existing and the Warsaw Pact disappeared. That is why Russia will try not to lose its world influence. It can be observed from Russia’s foreign policy that it is trying to form USSR which was destroyed in 1991 in another form. For this purpose Russia brought its military to the west first to Crimea, Abkhaziya and south Osetiya and conquered these territories. There are assertions that the next will be Central Asia. It is clear even if it is not declared openly that Kazakhstan moved its capital Almata to Astana because it doubted of Russia. (*Alibi*, 22 April 2014, no. 21)

The article raises the issue of migration from Central Asia particularly from Kyrgyzstan to Russia and sees it as a threat to Central Asia that Russia will initiate similar referendum like in Crimea in Central Asia, too:

Many migrants from Kyrgyzstan are getting Russian citizenship. By increasing the number of citizens by giving them Russian citizenship the Russian government will try to make a referendum like in Crimea to annex Central Asia in the future. (*Alibi*, 22 April 2014, no. 21)

Russian-language private newspaper *Vecherniy Bishkek* also narrated on the possible influence of “Crimean campaign” of Russia on integration projects in CIS (*Vecherniy Bishkek*, March 2014). The main topic of the interview with local political experts and independent journalists “No one wants war” from March tells about the consequences of the Maidan on the regional security for Russia, Ukraine and Central Asia and raises the issue of the probability of the development of the same scenario in Central Asia. The news article in *Vecherniy Bishkek* from 19 March 2014 “Putin’s Appeal” writes about the Russian President Vladimir Putin’s address at the St George’s Hall of the Grand Kremlin Palace to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, residents of Russia, the Crimea and Sevastopol in connection with the request of the Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol to join the Russian Federation. The author referred to Putin’s appeal: “According to Putin, Crimea has been in the heart and mind of people of Russia and remains part of Russia.” (*Vecherniy Bishkek*, 19 March 2014).

Concluding Remarks

Analysis of the Kazakhstan’s and Kyrgyzstan’s media discourse in different languages reveals that their perspective towards Russia is rather complicated. In Kazakhstan, the official discourse in both state-sponsored Russian and Kazakh newspapers in general is in accordance with the country’s policy towards preserving closer political and economic engagement as well as strong cultural ties with Russia, seen as a traditional foreign policy ally and strategic partner. However, when the Crimean crisis escalated, later Russian foreign policy initiatives, including calls for further political integration within the EEU, “Russian World” and tensions with Ukraine over Crimea provoked more resistance and criticism (even if initially limited) across Kazakhstan’s media, especially private Kazakh-language outlets. Russian-language

newspapers had a more nuanced view towards Russia (and Soviet experiences are oftentimes projected to modern Russia); while some tend to recall the widespread famine in the 1930s, mass repression and deportations, as well as the policy of forced Russification, others praise Soviet industrial modernization and express nostalgic feelings towards the social security and stability.

The main discourses in Kyrgyz press differed according to the ownership and language of the print outlets. Russian language both state-owned and private newspapers' coverage of annexation of Crimea was pro-Russian and not balanced by providing a platform mainly for pro-Russian voices over the issue of annexation of Crimea. The voices of pro-Ukrainian political experts and neutral political experts were not heard on the pages of these newspapers. They did not provide balanced, neutral and objective information by giving platform for both Russian and Ukrainian voices and discourse and neutral narratives from third party. They took pro-Russian position and narrated about annexation of Crimea as justified and supported Russia's actions in Ukraine and Crimea. They also referred to government of Kyrgyzstan in relation to recognition of referendum in Crimea legitimate which Kyrgyz language both state-owned and private newspapers did not. Russian-language press discourses contributed to the construction of a narrative of crisis that made the annexation of Crimea possible. The analysis of both content and discourse analysis of the stories of Russian-language press shows that there was a more pro-Russian coverage in Russian-speaking press, and that they contributed in some extent to the political consequences of these discourses and narratives for the legitimization of the annexation.

Findings include that the amount of coverage was rather small in official, state-published or sponsored newspapers while in privately owned newspapers, the amount and spectrum of coverage is wider. It seems also that in Kazakhstan, the Kazakh-language papers are less controlled by the officials and therefore more varied in their views than Russian-language papers. In some private newspapers, the similarities of Northern Kazakhstan and Crimea were discussed while the state media reported only the official version that the annexation is against international law but that the people of Crimea also have right to organize a referendum. In Kyrgyzstan, the coverage had broadly the same pattern, Kyrgyz-language privately owned newspapers being the most varied and critical in their views.

In Kazakhstan, projection to Eurasian union discussion was visible. This track was also visible in Kyrgyzstan, particularly in *Vecherniy Bishkek*. Its stories were about possible influence of "Crimean campaign" of Russia on integration projects in CIS, CSTO and EEU. There were also projections on the information war between Russia and the West, and speculations if some nearby location would be taken over by Russia.

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¹ According to the Ministry of Justice (2013), the three newspapers with the largest circulations rates appear in Bishkek: the dailies *Vecherniy Bishkek* (150,000), *Super Info* (120,000) and the weekly *Delo No.* (16,000). Many other newspapers have more limited circulation.

² It aimed mostly at the regulation of television and radio broadcasting, having left out the Internet-based media. However, the majority of news agencies and websites take the bilingual approach by default and publish materials both in Kyrgyz and in Russian languages.