

Foreign policy fatigue? Russian mass media agenda setting strategies and public opinion on the 2018 pension reforms

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Abstract

The scholarship on Russian media is beset with the assumption that the Russian public is unable to ‘vote with their remote’ in a homogenously pro-regime media environment and instead passively accepts messaging from the official mass media. This assumption is assessed here in a case study using quantitative content methods to examine the discrepancies between official mass media agenda-setting and public opinion during the period of salience of the news event of the 2018 pension reforms. The pension reform, as an obtrusive domestic political issue in contrast to the unobtrusive international news events which dominate Russian news coverage, stood out as one of the major events of the year in the view of the Russian public. This article finds that official mass media undertook agenda-setting measures to de-emphasize negative aspects of the pension reform news events, emphasize positive aspects, and distract public attention towards more sensationalist foreign policy news items. However, it also finds that public opinion priorities on news issues were incongruent with media agenda-setting, indicating that official mass media messages are not accepted uncritically by the Russian public.

Keywords

Russia, media, agenda-setting, pensions, public opinion, legitimacy

1. Introduction

According to agenda-setting theory, the way that publics understand and evaluate their government's performance is shaped by information they receive from the media, who make choices about the importance and character of news events.¹ While classical agenda-setting theory focuses on the influence of media on the public, newer approaches have specified limits, including when a news event is 'obtrusive' or directly evident in people's lives, and when the public in its own turn influences media agenda-setting.² This newer literature argues that publics 'vote with their remote' by switching to a different media source if a media source does not sufficiently reflect their interests.³ Robertson and Greene note that publics in non-democracies are often assumed to be passive recipients of government-led media strategies who are unable to vote with their remote as a result of the relative lack of press freedom.⁴ This assumption deserves to be examined in the context of the Russian media environment and its level of congruence with public opinion.

This article studies the Russian state-controlled media's strategies to shape public opinion in Russia through the case study of a particularly polarizing domestic news event: the pension reforms proposed by the Russian government in summer 2018. In the midst of the euphoria of the 2018 FIFA World Cup hosted in Russia, the Russian Duma (Parliament) proposed increasing the retirement age from 60 to 65 for men by 2023 and from 55 to 63 for women by 2026, a proposal met with widespread criticism from all sides of the government-sanctioned and grassroots opposition, as well as in surveys, political protests, and petitions.⁵ The scale of backlash to this policy proposal, which was 'softened' by Putin and implemented with numerous amendments in September 2018, gives us the opportunity to study a rare case where Russian authorities could treat public reaction to a policy like a genuine policy crisis.⁶

This article demonstrates the strategic role which the Russian state-controlled media play in promoting government policies through agenda-setting choices and explores their relationship to public opinion throughout the pension reform debates in summer 2018. I argue that while the official mass media employ strategies of *agitation* and de-problematization concurrently, media and public opinion perceptions of issue salience diverged on questions of foreign and domestic policy, such that a 'foreign policy fatigue' effect can be noticed among the public.

¹ Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, 'The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36.2 (1972), 176–87 (p. 177).

² Lutz Erbring, Edie N. Goldenberg, and Arthur H. Miller, 'Front-Page News and Real-World Cues: A New Look at Agenda-Setting by the Media', *American Journal of Political Science*, 24.1 (1980), 16–49 (p. 18).

³ Monika Djerf-Pierre, 'The Crowding-Out Effect', *Journalism Studies*, 13.4 (2012), 499–516 (p. 501); W. Russell Neuman, 'The Threshold of Public Attention', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 54.2 (1990), 159–76 (p. 174).

⁴ Graeme Robertson and Samuel Greene, 'The Kremlin Emboldened: How Putin Wins Support', *Journal of Democracy*, 28.4 (2017), 86–100 (p. 91).

⁵ Martin Brand, 'Carrot and Stick: How It Was Possible to Raise the Retirement Age in Russia', *Russian Analytical Digest*, 225 (2018), 2–5 (pp. 2–4).

⁶ Janis Kluge, *Kremlin Launches Risky Pension Reform: Plan to Raise Retirement Age Undermines Confidence in Russian Leadership*, SWP Comment (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2018), p. 5 (p. 2).

The structure of this article proceeds in three parts. First, the Russian media system's persuasive power shall be explained and its role in shaping public discourse outlined in the theoretical portion. Next, the case of pension reforms will be introduced and the research method will be developed. Finally, the quantitative results of the Russian televised media and public opinion perceptions of news issue importance will be discussed and assessed according to their correspondence with the main hypotheses.

2. Persuasive power and media in Russia

Russia is generally situated by scholars between democracy and traditional authoritarianism because it appears democratic in “form” but is autocratic in “content”.⁷ As Guriev and Treisman suggest, contemporary authoritarian regimes like Russia rely more on informational manipulation than repression to achieve their preferred outcomes, and unlike the autocracies of the 20th century, such neo-authoritarian regimes maintain power without isolating or subjugating their populations to totalitarian ideologies.⁸ Consequently, *coercive* power, which relies on force and punishment, is not the sole or primary method of control under Russian authoritarianism; alongside it persuasive power is necessary, which relies on emotions and discourse.⁹

The concept of legitimacy is key to persuasive power. In democratic and neo-authoritarian contexts, citizens’ understanding of governmental power is constructed, and requires a sense of legitimacy to become authority. Given van der Toorn et al.’s finding that people who feel powerless to change a system are more likely to view it as legitimate, legitimacy also works to impede the manifestation of discontent through dissent.¹⁰ The media can provide such legitimating rhetoric, drawing on Weber’s concepts of legal (democratic, constitutional, presidential), traditional (Russian tradition of strong leaders, religious traditions), and charismatic (Putin as effective manager, Putin as national symbol) authority.¹¹ In particular, charismatic legitimacy is strongly cultivated in Putin’s Russia, such that the president appears to be “the only legitimate political institution” to the public.¹²

The media constitute an advantageous instrument of persuasive power for authoritarian regimes because they represent a method of controlling the information citizens use to evaluate their governments. These goals are accomplished through what Schedler calls a media environment of “radical unfairness”, wherein the government-controlled media is the most widely accessible, and is thus able to set the agenda of public discourse according to regime preferences.¹³ In order to study how pro-governmental media seek to legitimize Putin

⁷ Jonathan Becker, ‘Russia and the New Authoritarians’, *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 22.2 (2014), 191–206; Floriana Fossato, Vladimir Putin and the Russian Television ‘Family’, *Les Cahiers Russes* (Paris: Centre d’études et de recherches internationales, 2006), pp. 1–15; Sarah Oates, ‘The Neo-Soviet Model of the Media’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 59.8 (2007), 1279–97.

⁸ Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, ‘Informational Autocrats’, *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 33.4 (2019), 100–127 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/26796838>>.

⁹ Becker; Johannes Gerschewski, ‘The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-Optation in Autocratic Regimes’, *Democratization*, 20.1 (2013), 13–38.

¹⁰ See Jojanneke van der Toorn and others, ‘A Sense of Powerlessness Fosters System Justification: Implications for the Legitimation of Authority, Hierarchy, and Government’, *Political Psychology*, 36.1 (2015), 93–110 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12183>>.

¹¹ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, trans. by G. Roth and C. Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), p. 212.

¹² Kirill Rogov, ‘Triumphs and Crises of Plebiscitary Presidentialism’, in *Putin’s Russia*, ed. by Leon Aron (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 2015), pp. 83–105 (p. 85).

¹³ Andreas Schedler, ‘Elections Without Democracy: The Menu of Manipulation’, *Journal of Democracy*, 13.2 (2002), 36–50 (p. 43).

– and thus the political system – the three nationally broadcast television channels, *Pervyy Kanal*, *Rossiya 1* and *NTV*, called the ‘official mass media’, are an ideal choice of Russian media, as their editorial policy is closely controlled by the state and thus most closely represent the government’s point of view.¹⁴ The official mass media are considered the most influential media in Russia, with between 85% and 73% of Russians using it as their primary source of news in March and August 2018, respectively.¹⁵

The scholarship on Russian media agrees that the official mass media are intentional and strategic in pursuing persuasive power over the public. To an extent, this type of agenda-setting is a product of marketization, and thus follows sensationalist trends noted in Western televised media, such as disproportionate live coverage of terrorist attacks, catastrophes, and conflicts over other issues, but is distinct in its purposeful and homogeneous pro-Putinist political message.¹⁶ Russian state media coverage focuses on overwhelmingly positive stories of Putin’s successes, with, for example, his campaigns in the Chechen War and the steadily growing economy lauded.¹⁷ Moreover, controversial political issues are discouraged and continually displaced from the Russian state media agenda in a strategy called “de-problematization”,¹⁸ in which problems are framed as non-problematic or coverage of them is avoided entirely.¹⁹

Since Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012, scholars have noticed a shift in Russian media discourse, as oil-based economic legitimacy – the principal benchmark by which Russians evaluated the effectiveness of the government in the 2000s – began to produce diminishing returns amid economic stagnation.²⁰ Rogov argues that Putin’s legitimacy has relied increasingly on bursts of popularity achieved through the rally-round-the-flag effect, a popularity-boosting phenomenon where an international crisis event may be used by unpopular leaders to distract from economic woes and be rewarded for patriotic action.²¹ In

¹⁴ Florian Toepfl, ‘Managing Public Outrage: Power, Scandal, and New Media in Contemporary Russia’, *New Media & Society*, 13.8 (2011), 1301–19 (p. 1304).

¹⁵ ‘Kanaly Informatsii’, *Levada Centre*, 2018 <<https://www.levada.ru/2018/09/13/kanaly-informatsii/>>.

¹⁶ Vera Tolz and Yuri Teper, ‘Broadcasting Agitainment: A New Media Strategy of Putin’s Third Presidency’, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 34.4 (2018), 213–27 (p. 220); Sarah Oates, ‘The Neo-Soviet Model of the Media’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 59.8 (2007), 1279–97.

¹⁷ Robertson and Greene, p. 87.

¹⁸ Here, de-problematization is distinct from de-securitization, inasmuch as the former is used specifically to discuss the construction of social problems. For a discussion of the social constructivist interpretation of social problems, see John Clarke and Allan Cochrane, ‘The Social Construction of Social Problems’, in *Embodying the Social: Constructions of Difference*, ed. by Esther Saraga, Taylor&Francis e-library edition (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 4–37.

¹⁹ Anastasia Kazun, ‘Framing Sanctions in the Russian Media: The Rally Effect and Putin’s Enduring Popularity’, *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 24.3 (2016), 327–50 (p. 331); Yasaveev, Iskender G., ‘Konstruirovaniye “ne-problem”: Strategii deproblematizatsii situatsii’, *Zhurnal Sotsiologii i Sotsial’noy Antropologii*, 9.1 (2006), 91–102 (p. 98).

²⁰ Robertson and Greene, p. 88.

²¹ Rogov, ‘Triumphs and Crises of Plebiscitary Presidentialism’, p. 98; Jaroslav Tir and Shane P. Singh, ‘Is It the Economy or Foreign Policy, Stupid? The Impact of Foreign Crises on Leader Support’, *Comparative Politics*, 46.1 (2013), 83–101; Henry E. Hale, ‘How Crimea Pays: Media, Ralling ‘Round the Flag, and Authoritarian Support’, *Comparative Politics*, 50.3 (2018), 369–91 (p. 378).

such a crisis situation, the public perceives a given external other as a threat and thus feels united by their opposition to this other, thus reducing feelings of division and animosity toward leaders.

The importance of the rally effect in the Russian context can be explained by an increasing number of domestic policy failures and an increasingly favourable international discursive context. On the one hand, the regime's legitimation through economic success weakened as the Russian economy began to stagnate after the 2008 crisis, while the government reaction to the Bolotnaya protests saw Russia move toward further authoritarianism and away from democratic-legalistic legitimacy.²² On the other hand, tensions between Russia and the Western international order were rising since Putin's anti-American Munich speech in 2007, creating the right circumstances for Russian media to shift blame for policy failures outward.²³

In this context, Russia's discursive focus has shifted toward 'symbolic politics', relying on "traditional values, morals, and spirituality".²⁴ Tolz and Teper argue this new media strategy, emblematic of Putin's third presidency, is best understood through the concept of *agitainment* (a portmanteau of agitation and entertainment).²⁵ *Agitainment* refers to news events which politically mobilize and outrage culturally conservative viewers on identity politics issues, aligning the West, democracy, and pluralism with moral degradation, and align conservatism, autocracy, and Orthodox religion as essentially Russian and virtuous.²⁶ The political system has come to be legitimized on entirely different terms, moving away from an image of Putin as a stabilizer and "effective manager", and toward an image of him as the defender of socially conservative Orthodox values from the supposed moral decadence of Western societies, reinforcing the cohesion of 'Putin's majority', the socially conservative group of Russians who view Putin as a 'guardian' against Western moral decadence.²⁷

The rally campaigns used by the Russian media in this "Crimean period" of Putin's third presidency have been varied in character. The first rally identified by Sharafutdinova and Tolz and Teper was the Pussy Riot affair in early 2012, where radical feminists were jailed for performing a politically charged concert inside the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow.²⁸ Followed by this was the Crimean annexation and invasion of the Donbass, which to many

²² Rogov, 'The Art of Coercion', p. 153; Stanovaya; Robertson and Greene, p. 88.

²³ Vladimir Shlapentokh, 'Aggressive Foreign Policy as an Instrument for the Legitimization of Putin's Regime: Georgia's Case', *Cornell International Affairs Review*, 2.2 (2009), 35–41 (p. 39) <<https://doi.org/10.37513/ciar.v2i2.369>>.

²⁴ Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, 'The Pussy Riot Affair and Putin's Démarche from Sovereign Democracy to Sovereign Morality', *Nationalities Papers*, 42.4 (2014), 615–21 (p. 616).

²⁵ Tolz and Teper, p. 217.

²⁶ Ina Shakhrai, 'The Legitimization of Authoritarian Rule through Constructed External Threats: Russian Propaganda during the Ukrainian Crisis', *East European Quarterly*, 43.1 (2015), 29–54 (p. 30).

²⁷ Helge Blakkisrud, 'Blurring the Boundary between Civic and Ethnic: The Kremlin's New Approach to National Identity under Putin's Third Term', in *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000–2015*, ed. by Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 249–74 (p. 259); Sharafutdinova, p. 617.

²⁸ Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, 'The Pussy Riot Affair and Putin's Démarche from Sovereign Democracy to Sovereign Morality', *Nationalities Papers*, 42.4 (2014), 615–21 (p. 617); Vera Tolz and Yuri Teper, 'Broadcasting Agitainment: A New Media Strategy of Putin's Third Presidency', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 34.4 (2018), 213–27 (p. 217).

Russians represented the restoration of Russia's "major power" status in the international arena.²⁹ Subsequently, Russia became involved in the Syrian war, another move which raised its international prestige as a 'great power'.³⁰ Finally, the increasing animosity between Russia and the United States in the leadup to the 2016 election, including the new rounds of sanctions applied by Western governments in 2015 and 2016.³¹ These rally events have several elements in common: they assert Russia's identity as a great power and its civilizational values, while also emphasizing Russia's identity in opposition to the West, either literally on the battlefield, as in Syria, geopolitically, as symbolized by sanctions and election interference, or culturally, as seen with the conservative backlash to the Pussy Riot concert.

Overall, the Russian media provides saturated coverage of symbolic issues and crisis events: scandals involving Russian Orthodox values and the memory politics around Russia's role in World War II, the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, and other news coverage which lends itself to ideologically conservative, pro-statist political mobilization, while avoiding 'problematic' issues that can promote oppositional political mobilization, such as unemployment, economic problems, and health epidemics.³² To this end, the consecutive rally events take on the character of public relations campaigns with the goal of boosting patriotic sentiment and support for the government.

²⁹ Henry E. Hale, 'How Crimea Pays: Media, Ralling 'Round the Flag, and Authoritarian Support', *Comparative Politics*, 50.3 (2018), 369–91; Anastasia Kazun, *Agenda-Setting in Russian Media* (Moscow: Higher School of Economics, 2017).

³⁰ Tsygankov gives a thorough overview of the role of identity in Russia's recent cultural turn in its foreign policy. See Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*, 5th edn (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019), pp. 225–62.

³¹ Tsygankov, p. 230.

³² Yasaveev, p. 98; Tolz and Teper.

3. Foreign Policy Fatigue?

According to Downs' pre-eminent account, each news issue goes through a cycle of "issue-attention", from dormancy, to discovery, to enthusiasm, which is then followed by a decline in interest, after which new circumstances may renew interest in the issue.³³ This valuable way of understanding how media issues gain and lose salience over time has been underdiscussed in the literature on rally-round-the-flag effects in the Russian media. Sharafutdinova discusses the inherent limits in Russia's discourse strategy due to its overreliance on conservative-nationalist identity politics and subsequent alienation of less political Russians.³⁴ However, it is also worth adding that the strategy is weak in its overreliance on the rally effect, which aims to broaden the appeal of patriotic mobilization to a broader ideological audience; without the rally effect in place, socially conservative Russians make up only a modest support base for the regime. The risk of relying on rallies is that like for any news issue, public interest can only be sustained for so long, and so each rally must be followed by another or interest will be exhausted.³⁵ Although Russia has been able to maintain heightened leadership popularity through its exploitation of crisis events in media through the strategies of de-problematization and *agitainment*, the rally strategy may not be sustainable because of the diminishing returns of recycling rallies and the possibility that rallies as a type of event may experience a phase of fatigue on the whole.³⁶

Looking at the evolution of Russian public opinion since the Crimean annexation in [Figure 1](#), the period 2014-2019 is distinct and marked by several rally events: the Crimean annexation in March 2014 (event **A**), Russia's involvement in Syria in October 2015 (event **B**), the allegations of Russian interference in US politics from summer 2016 (event **C**), the election of Putin for a fourth term in March 2018 (event **D**), and the World Cup and pension reforms in summer 2018 (event **E**) among others. Despite these numerous rally effects, which have significant effects on public opinion in the short term, the medium-term trends of both Vladimir Putin's approval ratings and the public's estimation of the direction the country is moving towards are negative ([Figure 1](#)). These trends should not be exaggerated, because Putin still enjoys an approval 'supermajority' of 65% as of April 2021; nonetheless, these developments are remarkable within the context of the personalistic system of Russia and merit further examination.

More noticeably, a significant decline occurred between May and August 2018, when the pension reforms were hotly debated (events **D** to **E**). Many Russia analysts at the time associated this loss of popular support directly with the pension reforms, although the significance of the pension reforms on causing Putin's "dip in popularity" should not be overstated. While the true impact of this event on the political system's legitimacy can only be known in the longer term, Reynolds argues that the issues brought to the forefront of discussion in the contexts of pension reforms have existed before, but that such events as

³³ Anthony Downs, 'Up and Down with Ecology: The Issue-Attention Cycle', *Public Interest*, 28 (1972), 38–50 (p. 41).

³⁴ Sharafutdinova, p. 620; Hale, p. 387.

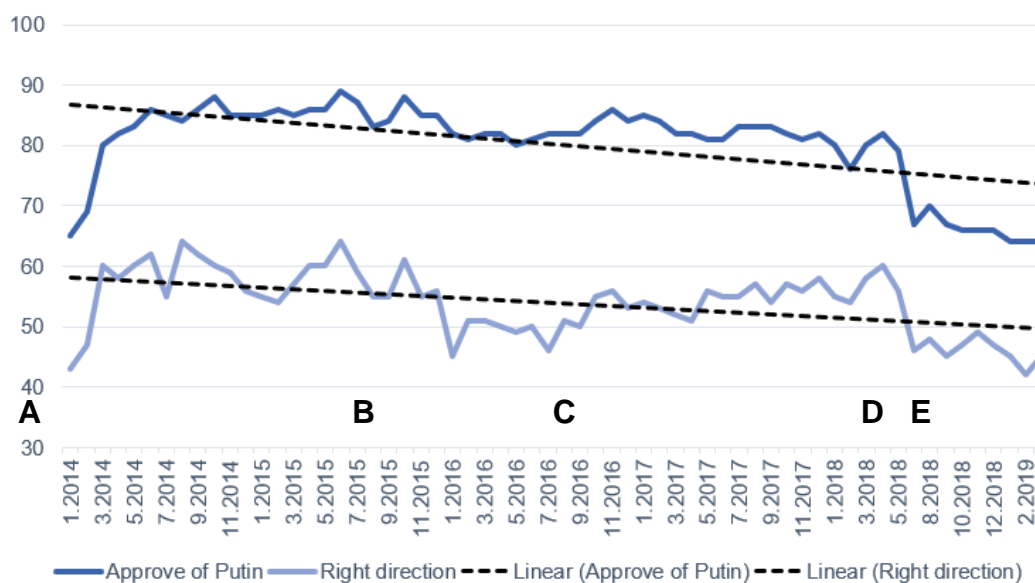
³⁵ Kazun, 'Framing Sanctions in the Russian Media', p. 349.

³⁶ Djerf-Pierre, p. 503.

Crimea “merely pushed the (economic, civil society, and domestic policy) problems into the background, from which they have now re-emerged”.³⁷

Figure 1: Approval Ratings of Russian Government, 2014-2019

This graph is adapted from the Levada Centre’s monthly surveys of approval ratings of government actors and assessment of the country’s direction.³⁸



Consequently, the Russian public increasingly wants the government, including the president specifically, to re-focus on domestic and economic affairs. In an utter reversal from what might be expected from a rally effect, “increasingly, people see foreign policy as a significant obstacle to Russia’s development”.³⁹ This indicates that not only have individual rallies exhausted their potential to interest the public, but that the concept of rallying itself, and the accompanying focus on international crisis-type news, is also entering a phase of public opinion fatigue.

In order to explore this idea, a study of media agenda-setting and public opinion on the pension reform proposal – a domestic event which came to define Russian public discourse in summer 2018 – may illuminate the evolution of persuasive power in contemporary Russian media. I propose that in line with this concept of ‘foreign policy fatigue’, public opinion and mass media agenda-setting diverged during this period, such that the official mass media continued its previous discourse strategies to a surprisingly unsuccessful effect on public opinion.

³⁷ Nathaniel Reynolds, ‘Putin Doesn’t Sweat His Unpopularity’, *Foreign Policy*, 28 November 2018 <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/28/putin-doesnt-sweat-his-unpopularity/>>.

³⁸ ‘Indikator [Approval Ratings]’, *Levada Centre*, 2019 <<https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/>>.

³⁹ Denis Volkov, ‘Why Putin Is Losing Popular Support’, *Carnegie Center Moscow*, 2018 <<https://carnegie.ru/commentary/77211>>.

4. Introducing the 2018 pension reform proposal

The case study in this article focuses on the period of salience of the 2018 pension reforms, a specific news event of negative political salience to the regime's interests, such as to examine how agenda-setting choices are employed as political tools with the purpose of influencing public opinion toward the government's preferred stance. My hypothesis is that while Russian agenda-setting strategies are employed as expected, their correlation with public opinion is low due to public 'fatigue' of media strategies which emphasize foreign policy issues. The aim of this research is to examine whether *agitation* and de-politicization strategies are utilized by the official state media and analyse what the goals of such media strategies are and to what extent they were accomplished by this media coverage.

Although rare when the media sphere is dominated by homogeneous discourse, problematic news – describing a chronic problem such as unemployment or corruption – earns a place on the news agenda when these issues are obtrusive, i.e., noticeable through other means than media communication. For example, one is likely to notice inflation or tax increases through one's everyday life without ever turning on the television.⁴⁰ In conditions where an obtrusive socio-economic issue can gain salience, it can sometimes become a crisis, which is an acute and unforeseeable event in which the persuasive and coercive power of a political system is disaffirmed.⁴¹ Therefore, it disrupts the normal political processes by calling into question the legitimacy of the political system. In such a context of de-legitimization, there is more opportunity for “contest between frames and counter-frames concerning the nature and severity of a crisis”; therefore, official mass media find themselves in a defensive position to re-establish discursive hegemony over counter-discourses.⁴²

The 2018 pension reform proposal and ensuing protest wave, largely taking place from June to September 2018, represents a rare example of such a policy crisis in the Russian context. The discussion around pensions took a specific form uncharacteristic of the pension reform debate in other time periods, manifesting through protests and public debate during the period between the policy proposal on June 14 and the policy implementation on September 26; this specificity during the given time frame is one mark of a policy crisis rather than a more prolonged policy problem. Although in theory such a policy proposal is part of normal political processes and does not represent a betrayal of political norms in the manner of a symbolic crisis like the Watergate scandal, in this case the public reacted in a way that demonstrated a significant departure from normal political processes. Moreover, the government concessions on this matter were unusual, considering that the public is not normally considered a part of the policy-making process.⁴³

⁴⁰ Neuman, p. 162.

⁴¹ Claus Offe, 'Crisis of Crisis Management: Elements of a Political Crisis Theory', *International Journal of Politics*, 6.3 (1976), 29–67 (pp. 31–36).

⁴² Arjen Boin, Paul 't Hart, and Allan McConnell, 'Crisis Exploitation: Political and Policy Impacts of Framing Contests', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16.1, 81–106 (p. 82); Offe, pp. 31–36.

⁴³ Brand, p. 2.

Until recently, it was considered “taboo” for politicians to discuss pensions in Russia, partly because maintaining the Soviet-era pension age had long been a promise of President Putin.⁴⁴ Pensions, like many other social services such as healthcare, childcare, and unemployment benefits, are a sensitive issue for former communist states given the social expectations built of a “cradle-to-grave” system of social safety nets, but these expectations are unable to be met in the context of financially deteriorating post-communist pensions systems.⁴⁵ In the case of Russia, a quickly ageing population made the long-term financial viability of Soviet-style pensions extremely questionable, and this was only expounded by a number of early retirement exceptions for veterans, women with multiple children, and other categories.⁴⁶ Moreover, 50% of Russian pensioners claim their pension while continuing to work, an unsurprising phenomenon given that pension-aged workers earn salaries of 21-27% less compared to younger workers.⁴⁷ Thus, pensions are not seen so much as a retirement fund but a means of achieving a marginally more comfortable standard of living. These factors combined make the pensions system not only financially ineffective, but also cause the real age of retirement in the country to be considerably higher than the pension age.⁴⁸

Due to these difficult economic circumstances and social expectations, over 90% of Russians disapproved of the pension reform bill.⁴⁹ In the two months after the first bill was proposed, this deeply ingrained disapproval manifested as a decline by more than 12% in approval ratings for the Prime Minister, the Duma, and the President in the space of a month.⁵⁰ Several hundred thousand people took part in protests in major cities over the summer, with several notable attendees including representatives of parliamentary opposition parties, from KPRF to LDPR, as well as grassroots opposition actors like Alexei Navalny, who was briefly imprisoned for his involvement in the protests.⁵¹ Although Putin initially avoided becoming involved with the pension reforms, it was eventually seen as necessary for him to intervene, which he did to introduce concessions on the bill to reduce the increase for women’s retirement age from the proposed 63 to 60.⁵² Despite this, less than a third of Russians believed that Putin’s amendments, which would be the version of the bill to become law, improved the proposal meaningfully.⁵³

⁴⁴ Brand, p. 3.

⁴⁵ Oana Armeanu, *The Politics of Pension Reform in Central and Eastern Europe: Political Parties, Coalitions, and Policies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 2.

⁴⁶ Oxana Sinyavskaya, *Pension Reform in Russia: A Challenge of Low Pension Age*, PIE Discussion Paper Series (Moscow: Project on International Equity, 2005), p. 17.

⁴⁷ Tatyana Lomskaya, ‘Zarplata rabotaŭshchego pensionera na chetvert’ men’she sredneĭ po strane’, *Vedomosti [Online]*, 10 August 2018 <<https://www.vedomosti.ru/economics/articles/2018/10/08/783073-sberbank-dohod-rabotayuschego-pensionera>>

⁴⁸ Sinyavskaya, p. 12.

⁴⁹ Vladimir A. Ilyin, and Mikhail V. Morev, ‘Pensionnaĭa reforma i naratsaŭschie problemy legitimnosti vlasti’, *Ekonomicheskie i Sotsial’nye Peremeny: Fakty, Tendentsii, Prognoz*, 11.4 (2018), 9–34 (p. 17).

⁵⁰ Ilyin and Morev, p. 11.

⁵¹ Brand, p. 4.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

The pension reforms were thus visibly politically salient on many levels and affected government approval ratings significantly. This policy proposal was a negative development for the public's perception of the Russian government and its political institutions, judging by public approval ratings decreases and mass protests ([Figure 1](#)). If we argue that official mass media act as a tool of persuasive power for the government's interests, it is of great interest to understand how the media acted to counteract the deep dislike of the pension reforms through their agenda-setting choices and whether these had the intended effect on the public.

5. Research Method

This research draws on quantitative content analysis methods to examine Russian official mass media representations of the pension reform and surrounding policy crisis and their correlation with public opinion, such as to effectively answer two main questions:

- To what extent did official mass media agenda-setting choices correspond to the strategies of *agitation* and de-problematization in this time period?
- To what extent were official mass media agenda-setting strategies congruent with public opinion?

In order to answer these questions, an analysis of agenda-setting is well-suited to assessing the extent to which media set their preferences toward *agitation* and away from problematic news, and to compare media agenda-setting with public opinion preferences from the Levada Center's monthly and yearly surveys on the issues considered most important by Russians.⁵⁴ The study of agenda-setting was based on a systematic search of televised news broadcast transcripts (limited to news reports) of the television channels *NTV*, *Pervyy Kanal*, and *Rossiya 1* via the Integrum database of Russian-language media between June 14 and September 27, 2018.⁵⁵ The news events to include as search terms were selected from the 20 most important news events of 2018 for Russians according to a Levada Centre survey and excluded topics which were determined irrelevant to the case either due to their time frame (outside June 14-September 27 period) or topic relevance (not directly related to Russia).⁵⁶ The topics fitting the criteria were sorted as either international or domestic and according to their intensity and time frame of discussion as portrayed in [Figure 2](#). Once search terms were inputted, one out of every ten search results was systematically counted in the total of transcripts ([Appendix 9.1](#)).

The collection of news transcripts is limited to the three televised media channels representative of official mass media primarily because of these media's incentives to follow the government line more than other media sources, but also because these media were the most popular source of news among Russians in 2018.⁵⁷ Although social media are taking an increasing role in Russia's media landscape, the internet is far more decentralized, and official government-connected media are only a minority among the myriad Telegram channels and Youtubers available for media consumers to choose. To study the extent of the state's ability to influence public opinion through the media, it is preferable to focus on the three most domestically influential state-controlled media.

⁵⁴ 'Zapomnivshiesia Sobytiia', *Levada Centre*, 2018 <<https://www.levada.ru/2018/09/28/zapomnivshiesya-sobytiya-22/>>; 'Zapomnivshiesia Sobytiia', *Levada Centre*, 2018 <<https://www.levada.ru/2018/07/30/zapomnivshiesya-sobytiya-20/>>.

⁵⁵ The transcript collection is limited to news reports rather than all television programmes because Integrum only collects transcripts of news broadcasts. This search was performed in 2019 and was limited to these three channels.

⁵⁶ Vladimir Dergachev 'Levada Center - Rossiiane nazvali vazhneishie sobytiia 2018 goda.', *Levada Centre*, 2018 <<https://www.levada.ru/2018/12/24/rossiyane-nazvali-vazhneishie-sobytiya-2018-goda/>>.

⁵⁷ 'Kanalny Informatsii'.

This research only pertains to news events considered to have relevance to Russia's political environment. While the inclusion of the FIFA World Cup as a political news event might be surprising, sports mega-events are shown to hold considerable importance for symbolic politics.⁵⁸ Additionally, choosing news topics among the most memorable for Russians in the year 2018 ensures that each topic discussed attracted a high amount of public attention and were not so momentaneous as to have been forgotten by the end of the year. In this way, events which gain attention but have “low resilience” – i.e., are forgettable and therefore cannot compete with other news events – are excluded.⁵⁹ Moreover, to determine the intensity of media discussions, a Herfindahl index, which is used in economics to determine the coefficient of market monopolization, as well as in academia to determine a scholar's the relative influence according to number of citations, was plotted over time to analyse how various news issues competed for attention. This is an adaptation of a research method employed by Kazun in a previous study on agenda-setting in Russian media.⁶⁰ The index ranges from 0 (where all media events are given equal amount of attention) to 1 (where one media topic completely monopolizes the agenda) and is calculated by squaring the percentage of coverage each topic is given according to the number of transcripts, then adding the squared percentages together, such that more weight is given to those media topics with a greater amount of coverage.

Figure 2: Major News Events of June-September 2018

Categorized according to Downs' theory on issue-attention cycles.⁶¹

	International	Domestic
Peak enthusiasm (developing and novel)	World Cup (June 14- July 15)	Pension reforms (June 14-September 27)
Background (developing but not novel; past the point of peak enthusiasm)	Sanctions (ongoing, but news sanctions introduced August 6), ⁶² Conflict in the Donbass (ongoing, but a Russian military plane was downed September 18), ⁶³	Political protests (ongoing, but increased by over 100% in July-September) ⁶⁵

⁵⁸ David Black, 'The Symbolic Politics of Sport Mega-Events: 2010 in Comparative Perspective', *Politikon*, 34.3 (2007), 261–76.

⁵⁹ Downs, p. 47.

⁶⁰ Anastasia Kazun, *Agenda-Setting in Russian Media* (Moscow: Higher School of Economics, 2017).

⁶¹ Downs, p. 40.

⁶² 'Skripal Case: US Sanctions over Novichok Hit Russian Rouble', *BBC News [Online]*, 9 August 2018 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-45126207>>.

⁶³ 'Russia Blames Israel after Military Plane Shot down off Syria', *BBC News [Online]*, 18 September 2018 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-45556290>>.

⁶⁵ *Rost protestnoy aktivnosti v Rossii: Rezul'taty vserossiyskogo monitoringa 2017-2018 gg* (Moscow: Tsentr ekonomicheskikh i politicheskikh reform, 2018).

	Syrian conflict (ongoing, but Donetsk rebel leader Sakharchenko died August 31) ⁶⁴	
Volatile (novel, but not impactful or sustained enough to maintain peak enthusiasm)	Helsinki Summit (July 16) ⁶⁶	Regional elections (September 9)

⁶⁴ Anton Troianovski, 'Pro-Russian Rebel Leader Killed in Eastern Ukraine Blast', *The Washington Post [Online]*, 31 August 2018 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/_pro-russian-rebel-leader-killed-in-eastern-ukraine-blast/2018/08/31/12a18336-ad37-11e8-b1da-ff7faa680710_story.html>.

⁶⁶ Patrick Wintour, 'Helsinki Summit: What Did Trump and Putin Agree?', *The Guardian [Online]*, 17 July 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/17/helsinki-summit-what-did-trump-and-putin-agree>>.

6. Assessing media strategy and congruence with public opinion

6.1. Soccer, Syria, summits... But what about the protests?

My theoretical framework suggests media agenda-setting should work against the promotion of news stories such as the pension reforms for a few reasons, including market incentivization toward sensationalist rather than problematic news, but also incentives from the political leadership to avoid domestic policy discussions more generally. Overall, the tendency toward sensationalism and breaking news is evident during the time frame examined, as news coverage peaks during time periods when news events are in a state of change, like during the World Cup, when up to 80% of news items collected discussed this topic ([Figure 3](#)). The high number of transcripts found on the World Cup also concurs with the expected preference toward symbolic news over problematic news is visible, as the coverage of the conflict in Syria and the World Cup – events with clear protagonists and antagonists with constantly developing stories – far exceeded any other news items in the period studied.

The relation between issue coverage and the H-index provides useful information about the nature of media agenda-setting competition and particularly the pension reforms' place within this phenomenon ([Figure 3](#); [Figure 4](#)). Event A (week of June 29-July 7) shows pensions coverage diminishing as the World Cup issue increases in coverage, as seen by the increase in the H-index. Event B (week of July 13-19) shows a small bump in pensions coverage in the week that the pensions bill passed a first stage of votes in the Duma and the Helsinki summit between President Putin and President Trump took place, meaning that several events of importance happened concurrently and therefore heightened issue competition, thus decreasing the H-index. Event C shows the pension coverage reaching its zenith in response to real-world cues, or in other words, Putin's announcement of softening measures on the pension reform bill on August 28th. Event D depicts a decline in coverage and a subsequent monopolization of news coverage by the Syrian conflict. Overall, increases in coverage of the pension issue happen in tandem with decreases in issue monopolization, such that it is never the top-covered issue.

Figure 3: Coverage of Major News Events

Stacked area chart of news event coverage in the official mass media; full data for my graphs and tables are located in the appendix. H-Index refers to Herfindahl Index of market concentration, where 1=monopoly and 0=completely equal number of small items.

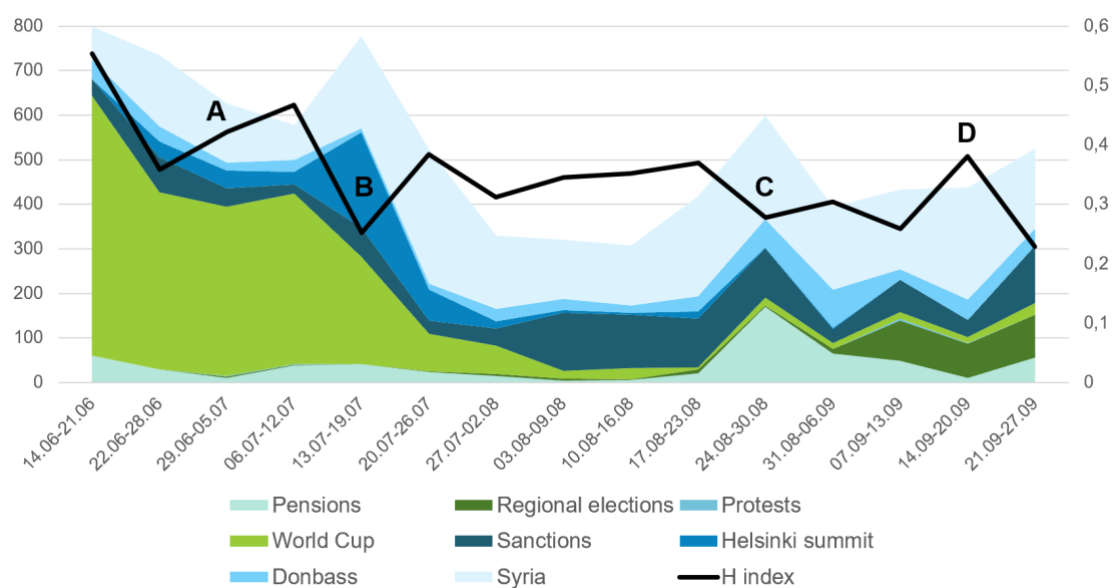


Figure 4: Issue Monopolization in Official Mass Media

Correlation between Herfindahl Index and proportion of average media coverage as listed below. A positive and high correlation is an indicator of monopolization.

	Pensions	World Cup	Helsinki Summit	Sanctions	Regional elections	Donbass	Protests	Syria
% media coverage	7.65	29.04	5.57	13.47	3.87	6.48	0.10	33.81
Correl.	-0.368	0.710	-0.163	-0.340	-0.408	-0.222	-0.129	-0.428

The World Cup had a high and positive correlation with media agenda monopolization; as [Figure 4](#) shows, it is the only event with a positive correlation with monopolization. Nonetheless, other media events have monopolized the agenda at other points in time as well. Following the H-index line in [Figure 3](#), a small peak of the H-index in the week of August 31-September 9 indicates an increase in coverage of the Donbass issue, also corresponding with a new development – the death in Donetsk of pro-Russian rebel leader Sakharchenko.⁶⁷ Similarly, coverage of Syria was high and sustained rather evenly across the time period studied, but it increased most significantly in the week September 14-20 (event **D**), which corresponds to the downing of a Russian military plane in Syria on September 18.⁶⁸ Thus, the media agenda is more monopolized by novel events.

⁶⁷ Troianovski.

⁶⁸ 'Russia Blames Israel after Military Plane Shot down off Syria'.

Generally, these results comply with issue-attention cycle and rally-round-the-flag theories, as issues were most salient in the media when they had a novelty factor, and therefore provided opportunities for new angles and actors.⁶⁹ Yet there are some surprises which might be attributed to a pro-government media strategy. Despite numerous developments regarding the issue of protests, with new methods and higher than normal numbers of protests happening, this topic was widely ignored by the official mass media; the pension issue overall follows the same pattern. Conversely, the issue of Syria did not follow a cycle of attention, but stayed at a constantly large fraction of the media agenda throughout the time period studied, gathering an overall higher number of transcripts (2638) than even the World Cup (2266) (see [Appendix 9.1](#)).

6.2. Operation Distraction or Operation Persuasion?

Considering the results found above, there seem to be two major strategies undertaken by official mass media in the period June-September 2018, largely corresponding to the strategies of *agitation* and de-problematization, with the general purpose of distracting from domestic news and focusing on international news. Two major news events, the World Cup and the pension reforms, appear to comprise the targets of these strategies. However, it seems that the media were not entirely successful in pursuing either a de-problematization or *agitation* strategy, such that public opinion maintained a strong and highly negative opinion about pension reforms throughout this time period.

Firstly, an *agitation* strategy seems to have been pursued given the attention media focused upon ‘*agitating*’ international news events in news broadcasts. In terms of its evolution in media salience with a distinctive rise and descent, and in terms of its positive and significant correlation of 0.71 with the Herfindahl monopolization index ([Figure 3](#), [Figure 4](#)), the World Cup fits the expected media coverage of a high-enthusiasm rally event well.⁷⁰ Although the World Cup is not a typical *agitating* news event, as it does not outrage the public on the basis of identity politics, it is nonetheless a sensationalist international media event that brings a sense of national pride and unity, and therefore carries the potential of rallying around the flag.⁷¹ Moreover, even without overtly political angles, a sports event which is heavily mediatized and which pits one country against another can heighten a sense of nationalism, having a potential to win a “world class” status for Russia.⁷² Incidentally, the World Cup was a well-timed rally event, as the pension reforms were announced on the same day that the FIFA World Cup started, with the likely expectation that the latter news event would dominate the media landscape. A factor which points to the government preparing specifically for a media strategy relying on the World Cup as a distracting news event is the fact that a law was passed banning protests in all cities hosting World Cup matches throughout its duration from June 14-

⁶⁹ Djerf-Pierre, p. 504.

⁷⁰ Downs, p. 39.

⁷¹ Tolz and Teper, p. 218.

⁷² Black, p. 274.

July 15, meaning that opposition activists in host cities had their requests for demonstrations throughout July denied.⁷³

The World Cup rally was complemented by other major international events, but it seems these other events were either too volatile or too ‘tired’ to be effective rallies. Firstly, the end of the World Cup was immediately succeeded by the Helsinki Summit between Putin and Trump, which had the potential to continue boosting national pride after the end of the World Cup because it heightened the image of Russia as a great power. However, its short-term nature, taking place one day on July 16, and limited effect on US-Russian relations negated its potential.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, the coverage of Syria stands out, taking up a continually large portion of the news agenda. Although there were many developments on this issue throughout June-September given its nature as a constantly evolving conflict, it was the most strongly negatively related news topic with issue monopolization as per the H-index. This seems to show that this issue was in a later stage of the issue-attention cycle such as the ‘background’ stage, and therefore was not capable of contributing meaningfully to public discourse without real-world changes which could re-start the cycle.⁷⁵

A second noticeable strategy is more oriented on de-problematization; this approach involves ‘selling’ the pension reforms by covering their positive attributes and de-emphasizing negative ones. However, this is not an easy task; the benefits of the pension reform are inherently hard to sell to a public because these benefits are diffuse, long-term, and only explainable through numbers, while oppositional actors are able to easily maximize the problem significance because of the populist character of economic grievances. Here, the media are in a contradictory position of simultaneously needing to advocate for the status quo in terms of institutions while also calling for the status quo to be changed in terms of policy. Therefore, even though the strategies of *agitation* and de-politicization normally prefer to ignore problematic news, in this situation, it was in the government’s interests for the media to ride the wave of the issue-attention cycle such as to accomplish two main goals: underemphasize negative aspects and amplify positive aspects.⁷⁶

Indeed, looking at the evolution of pension reforms coverage ([Figure 3](#)), the period that stands out is at the end of August, which, in response to real-world cues of Putin announcing concessions, rose significantly to a zenith of 170 transcripts in the week of 24-30 September. However, coverage did not merely reflect real-world cues but also media choices to amplify this coverage due to its more positive attributes compared to previous coverage. Indeed, Putin as a figure is considerably more popular than the Duma or Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev (70% approval in August 2018, compared to 30% and 28%), and his role in the story of pension reforms is less involved with the initially harsh bill and more involved with the latter, “softened”

⁷³ Polina Ivanova, ‘Russia Accused of Using World Cup to Bury Bad News’, *Reuters [Online]*, 2018 <<https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-soccer-worldcup-russia-dissent/russia-accused-of-using-world-cup-to-bury-bad-news-idUKKBN1JJ22L>>.

⁷⁴ Wintour.

⁷⁵ Djerf-Pierre, p. 512.

⁷⁶ Boin, Hart, and McConnell, p. 84.

bill.⁷⁷ Early on, Putin stated through a spokesperson that he was not involved with the initial bill; his major involvement was with the “softening” the pension reform such as to lower the proposed age to 60 for women.⁷⁸ Therefore, the peak of coverage around a time when a relatively popular figure came out in support of a more empathetic version of the bill indicates that this was part of a tendency to overreport positive aspects of the pension reforms and underreport negative ones. This is also evident when one considers how little the protests were covered despite the dramatic increase of protests to 1244 documented protests in July-September, 46.5% of which were related to the pension reforms.⁷⁹

Overall, it is clear that two strategies were employed in order to de-emphasize, de-problematize and distract from domestic policy issues, especially the pension reforms. In the following section, the effectiveness of these strategies will be assessed by observing public opinion perception of importance of various news events, which can show the effectiveness of a distraction or *agitation* approach, as well as public opinion perception of the pension reforms, which demonstrate the relative effectiveness of de-problematizing this news event.

6.3. Understanding the mismatch between media and public opinion

On the whole, public opinion and mass media showed considerable differences in contrast to traditional agenda-setting theory, which argues that in a media environment with little media freedom, and therefore little diversity of coverage, public opinion should be closely associated with media coverage.⁸⁰ Instead, the issues considered most important in public opinion considerably differ in several areas from the importance with which the media have treated them. While the World Cup media salience is comparable to public opinion salience, Syria’s large media salience is 107% more significant compared to its perceived importance among the Russian public (Figure 5). Conversely, one news item considered significant for Russians in 2018 – the series of protests associated with the pension reforms and other issues such as corruption, Putin’s re-election, and internet censorship – was barely covered in the official mass media, with a total of 8 mentions, despite having a public opinion salience 190% higher. Moreover, it is likely that the public opinion salience of protests was actually underreported by Russians surveyed because of its close association in this period with the news issue of pension reforms themselves. In the data on public perception of news issue salience from the month of July, the response which was categorized under pensions was labelled “pension reform, and the reaction to it”; therefore, the divergence between public opinion and media on this issue may be even starker in reality.⁸¹

As one of only two ‘new’ international news items in 2018, the World Cup was the only international news event where public opinion salience actually exceeded media salience. However, the public salience of this event is not proof of the fatigue theory’s weakness; not

⁷⁷ ‘Indikator’.

⁷⁸ Kluge, p. 3.

⁷⁹ *Rost protestnoĭ aktivnosti v Rossii*, pp. 2–3.

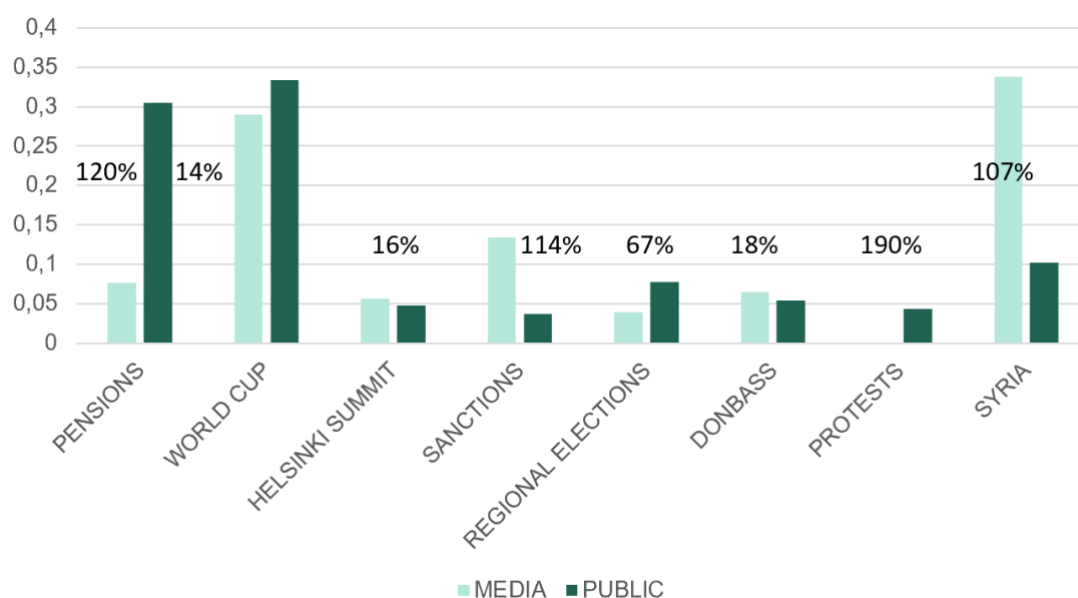
⁸⁰ Kazun, *Agenda-Setting in Russian Media*, p. 16.

⁸¹ ‘Zapomnivshiesiã Sobytiã’.

only was this event ‘new’ in terms of content, as an issue in its first cycle of issue-attention, but it was also ‘new’ in terms of genre, standing apart from other international issues. This is compounded by the fact that it was a comparatively non-political, obtrusive event for Russians living in host cities, and that its largely positive impact on Russia’s image was almost unique in an international environment where the antagonisms between Russia and other countries is heightened.

Figure 5: Relative Media and Public Opinion Saliency of Major News Events

Clustered bar chart of the major news events of June-September by their proportion of coverage in the mass media and the proportion of Russians naming it as an important news event according to Levada Centre surveys, with percentage differences indicated.⁸²



Meanwhile, like other domestic policy issues, the public was considerably more interested in the pension reforms than the media were. Kazun’s argument that the public’s need to assess risks contributes to issue saliency is relevant here, because developments and decisions made on the specifics of the pension reforms impact every Russian citizen directly.⁸³ Another factor explaining the higher saliency of domestic political issues is the public’s use of other sources of information, such as personal experiences and non-traditional media. In particular, the Russian public seems to have ‘voted with their remotes’ by switching off the television and preferring to use the internet to seek information, considering that 20-24% of Russians in 2018 believed that digital media provided better information on pension reforms, the Russian economy, and protest actions than television.⁸⁴

Overall, it appears that official mass media agenda-setting strategies were incongruent with public opinion as a result of issue fatigue and the influence of external factors such as personal

⁸² ‘Zapomnivshiesiā Sobytiā’.

⁸³ Kazun, *Agenda-Setting in Russian Media*, p. 16.

⁸⁴ ‘Kanal’ Informatsii’.

experience and alternative sources of information upon public opinion's perceptions of issue salience. Despite media strategies, Russians' personal perceptions of pensions as an important issue outweighed agenda-setting aiming to de-emphasize the reforms' negative impacts, such that Russians continued to have starkly negative views of the reforms even through September.⁸⁵ A small change in public opinion from external influence was visible, because public opinion on reforms became slightly less negative from June to September, but this was not a significant change, from 80% against to 75% against, according to the Russian government pollster FOM.⁸⁶ This shows a surprising and considerable resistance to external agenda-setting by the media and the government on issues of material and obtrusive salience to Russians.

⁸⁵ 'Otnoshenie rossiĭan k povysheniĭu pensionnogo vozrasta', *Fond Obshchestvennogo Mneniya*, 2018 <<https://fom.ru/Ekonomika/14104>>

⁸⁶ Ibid.

7. Conclusion

Overall, this article has challenged the assumption in classical agenda-setting theory that the public, and more so publics in contexts of non-free media, are passive recipients of media agenda-setting choices, rather than actors who construct meaning out of texts autonomously and use their own benchmarks to evaluate the legitimacy of media claims and of the political system.

This article has shown that ‘foreign policy fatigue’ was visible in the mismatch between public opinion and media in summer of 2018. This phenomenon is attributed to the Russian government-aligned media’s overreliance on international crisis events, or rallies, to stabilize the regime and promote government persuasive power domestically; in essence, the current Russian media strategies are becoming out of sync with the Russian public’s preferences. Nonetheless, this article does not suggest that the Russian regime is losing its grip over media agenda-setting, nor its ability to control the informational landscape of Russian politics. The focus here is on the disparities between the attention paid to obtrusive and non-obtrusive media events by the televised news media and the Russian public, owing to the specific characteristics of the media discourse in summer of 2018.

Moreover, this study was limited by its reliance on existing Levada Centre polling, which therefore did not include the possibility of controlling the results according to respondents’ preferred news sources. Without the ability to control for these and other important intervening variables, this study was not able to conduct any further quantitative analysis such as a regression analysis.

Although the Levada Centre found that between 85% (in March 2018) and 73% (in August 2018) of Russians used television as their main source of news information during the period of study, this figure includes all television channels, and not only *Pervyy Kanal*, *NTV*, and *Rossiya 1*.⁸⁷ Differences might therefore be noticed between viewers of these three channels and other channels. At the same time, the decision to use public opinion survey results surveying the entire population had the advantage of representing those Russians who ‘voted with their remote’ to get their news from other sources than these three dominant channels. Subsequently, this picture also allows us to see that the state-controlled news media do not have a monopoly over the news media landscape. A future study might expand on these results by surveying Russians who have recently changed preferred news sources, as it is apparent that since 2016, televised media has dropped in popularity by 13 points, from 86% of Russians to 69% choosing it as their as the most trusted news source.⁸⁸

While this article has found evidence that official mass media agenda-setting had a diminished synchronicity with public opinion in the context of pension reforms compared to the expectations from classical agenda-setting theory, the question remains as to whether this is a unique and temporary phenomenon, or whether the divergence between media and public

⁸⁷ ‘Kanally Informatsii’.

⁸⁸ ‘Istochniki Informatsii’, *Levada Centre*, 2020 <<https://www.levada.ru/2020/09/28/ggh/>>.

is part of a more sustained trend which will continue into the future. Data on media consumption choices seem to indicate the latter, given that televised media have recently been replaced by digital media (adding together social media and internet-based publications results in a figure of 75% in August 2020, compared to 69% for television) as the most trustworthy news sources for Russians.⁸⁹ These data are also indicative of the increasing importance for political communications literature to include social and digital media in the picture of how people receive information and assess their governments in future research, and how exposure to different types of news media has the ability to influence public opinion.

⁸⁹ 'Istochniki Informatsii'.

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9. Statistical Appendix

9.1. Total transcripts of major news events

	Pensions	World Cup	Helsinki Summit	Sanctions	Regional elections	Conflict Donbass	Protests	Syria	Sum
14.06 -	60	584	0	37	0	43	0	75	799
21.06									
22.06 -	29	398	35	79	0	34	0	160	735
28.06									
29.06 -	10	380	40	42	3	18	1	133	627
05.07									
06.07 -	38	383	28	21	2	26	1	79	578
12.07									
13.07 -	41	241	214	65	0	10	0	206	777
19.07									
20.07 -	23	85	70	29	2	12	0	303	524
26.07									
27.07 -	15	63	17	39	4	27	0	165	330
02.08									
03.08 -	4	17	7	130	5	25	0	132	320
09.08									
10.08 -	6	26	4	119	1	17	0	134	307
16.08									
17.08 -	21	5	15	110	8	34	0	225	418
23.08									
24.08 -	170	17	2	111	3	64	0	232	599
30.08									
31.08 -	65	12	3	31	11	87	0	185	394
06.09									
07.09 -	49	15	0	72	90	24	4	179	433
13.09									

14.09 - 20.09	10	13	0	38	77	46	2	251	437
21.09 - 27.09	56	27	0	128	96	39	0	179	525
SUM	597	2266	435	1051	302	506	8	263 8	780 3

9.2. Relative salience of major news issues in media

This was calculated as the fraction of the total number of transcripts collected in the given period. Herfindahl Index was calculated as the sum of squares of all fractions.

	Pensions	World Cup	Helsinki Summit	Sanctions	Regional elections	Conflict Donbass	Protests	Syria	H-index
14.06-21.06	0.075	0.731	0.000	0.046	0.000	0.054	0.000	0.094	0.554
22.06-28.06	0.039	0.541	0.048	0.107	0.000	0.046	0.000	0.218	0.358
29.06-05.07	0.016	0.606	0.064	0.067	0.005	0.029	0.002	0.212	0.422
06.07-12.07	0.065	0.663	0.048	0.036	0.003	0.045	0.002	0.137	0.468
13.07-19.07	0.053	0.310	0.275	0.084	0.000	0.013	0.000	0.265	0.252
20.07-26.07	0.044	0.162	0.134	0.055	0.004	0.023	0.000	0.578	0.384
27.07-02.08	0.045	0.191	0.052	0.118	0.012	0.082	0.000	0.500	0.312
03.08-09.08	0.012	0.053	0.022	0.406	0.016	0.078	0.000	0.413	0.345
10.08-16.08	0.020	0.085	0.012	0.388	0.003	0.055	0.000	0.436	0.352
17.08-23.08	0.050	0.012	0.036	0.263	0.019	0.081	0.000	0.538	0.370
24.08-30.08	0.284	0.028	0.003	0.185	0.005	0.107	0.000	0.277	0.277
31.08-06.09	0.165	0.030	0.008	0.079	0.028	0.221	0.000	0.470	0.304
07.09-13.09	0.113	0.035	0.000	0.166	0.208	0.055	0.009	0.413	0.259

14.09-20.09	0.023	0.030	0.000	0.087	0.176	0.105	0.005	0.574	0.381
21.09-27.09	0.107	0.051	0.000	0.244	0.183	8.074	0.000	0.341	0.229
ALL	0.077	.290	0.056	0.135	0.039	0.065	0.001	0.338	

9.3. Relative salience of major news issues in public opinion

The relative salience in public opinion was calculated as a fraction of the combined results of June-September and of the year.

	June	July	August	Septem	Year	SUM	Relative
Pensions	31	27	22	15	46	141	0.305
World Cup	56	55	7	0	36	154	0.333
Helsinki summit	0	15	6	1	0	22	0.048
Sanctions	0	0	6	1	10	17	0.037
Regional elections	0	0	2	24	10	36	0.078
Donbass	1	1	2	2	19	25	0.054
Protests	0	0	2	4	16	20	0.043
Syria	1	1	2	21	22	47	0.102
SUM						462	1

9.4. Relative salience of major news issues in media and public opinion

This was calculated from the overall relative salience of issues in media ([appendix 9.2.](#)) and public opinion ([appendix 9.3.](#)). The average was a simple mean, and the percentage difference was calculated as Media minus Public over Average.

COMPARED	SUM	MEDIA	PUBLIC
Pensions	597	0,076509	0,305195
World Cup	2266	0,290401	0,333333
Helsinki summit	435	0,055748	0,047619
Sanctions	1051	0,134692	0,036797
Regional elections	302	0,038703	0,077922

Donbass	506	0,06484 7	0,05411 3
Protests	8	0,00102 5	0,04329
Syria	2638	0,33807 5	0,10173 2

COMPARED	MEDIA	PUBLIC	AVERAGE	DIFF%
Pensions	0.07650 9	0.30519 5	0.1908519	1.19823 7
World Cup	0.29040 1	0.33333 3	0.3118672	0.13766 2
Helsinki summit	0.05574 8	0.04761 9	0.0516834	0.15727 9
Sanctions	0.13469 2	0.03679 7	0.0857442	1.14171 3
Regional elections	0.03870 3	0.07792 2	0.0583126	0.67256 5
Donbass	0.06484 7	0.05411 3	0.0594797	0.18047
Protests	0.00102 5	0.04329	0.0221576	1.90745 9
Syria	0.33807 5	0.10173 2	0.2199034	1.07476 1