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# **A FRIEND WHO WAS SUPPOSED TO LOSE: HOW DONALD TRUMP WAS PORTRAYED IN THE RUSSIAN MEDIA?**

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## **A FRIEND WHO WAS SUPPOSED TO LOSE: HOW DONALD TRUMP WAS PORTRAYED IN THE RUSSIAN MEDIA?<sup>3</sup>**

Donald Trump and his team have often been accused of having close ties to Russia and Russians expressed much greater support for Trump than residents of other countries. This article provides the first systematic analysis of Russian media coverage of Trump's activities during and after the election campaign. It concludes, on the basis of a sentiment analysis of relevant articles and network agendas of 500 Russian magazines and 250 leading federal newspapers, that Trump's media portrayal was not necessarily positive. During the election, Trump was portrayed by the Russian media not as Russia's favorite candidate, but as Hillary Clinton's opponent and a critic of U.S. recent policies. Only for a short period after Trump's victory in the elections, did the Russian media represent him as a friend of Russia, since there was hope that the new president would lift political and economic sanctions. Trump's policies failed to meet the expectations of the Russian people, and from the beginning of 2017, media coverage of Trump has become critical, hopes for lifting of political sanctions have weakened, and public opinion about the U.S. president has turned negative.

Keywords: Media, Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, U.S. Presidential Election, public opinion, network agenda.

JEL Classification: D72, L82

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## ***Introduction***

When the U.S. were actively engaged in the presidential race, a poll on the U.S. election was conducted by WIN/Gallup International Association. The poll, carried out among 45 countries, showed that Hillary Clinton was ahead of Donald Trump in every country but one, Russia<sup>4</sup>. For the Russian people, Trump's U.S. presidential election victory became the most memorable event of in November 2016, which attracted the attention of 47% respondents<sup>5</sup>. A month later, 28% of Russians named Trump's victory the most significant event of the year<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, not only did the U.S. presidential election draw the attention of the Russian media, but Russia also was a key topic of the U.S. election discussion. For instance, a Fox News Poll of May 2017 found 44% of Americans think Russia attempted to influence the presidential election to help Trump<sup>7</sup>.

One can assume that the media played a very significant role in attracting attention to the U.S. election and Trump's victory in both countries (Kazun, 2017; McCombs & Shaw, 1972, 1993). A presidential election is an unobtrusive issue (Demers, Craff, Choi, & Pessin, 1989; McCombs, Graber, & Weaver, 1981): the media can be a basis for forming public opinion since the population has no experience of interpersonal communication with the candidates. When it comes to a foreign election campaign, the mass media is the only source of information. The important role of the media in shaping public opinion on the U.S. election in Russia is confirmed by the fact that, at the very beginning of the election campaign, most Russians knew little if anything about the candidates. In July 2016, 60% of Russians knew nothing about Trump<sup>8</sup>, and after just a few months many of them were celebrating his victory.

But do U.S. presidential elections always attract the attention of Russians? Perhaps, such events are traditionally widely covered in Russia's international news, since the U.S. is the largest economy (Wu, 2007), has a large population (Rosengren, 1974), and has great political influence (Blondheim, Segev, & Cabrera, 2015)? Public opinion polls do not support these assumptions. For example, in 2012, only 13% of Russians considered Barack Obama's victory in the U.S. presidential election to be the most significant event of the year<sup>9</sup>. The 2012 Russian presidential election that resulted in Vladimir Putin being elected president again was named the most important event of the year by 29% of respondents. Putin's victory in 2012 and Trump's

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<sup>4</sup> Global Poll on the U.S. Election reveals that MOST NATIONS FAVOR CLINTON. TRUMP AHEAD OF HER ONLY IN RUSSIA. [[http://www.wingia.com/en/news/global\\_vote\\_on\\_us\\_elections\\_press\\_release/366/](http://www.wingia.com/en/news/global_vote_on_us_elections_press_release/366/)].

<sup>5</sup> According to the Levada Center surveys. See [<https://www.levada.ru/2016/11/24/14898/>]

<sup>6</sup> According to the Levada Center surveys. See [<https://www.levada.ru/2016/12/22/vazhnejshie-sobytiya-goda/>]

<sup>7</sup> See Fox News Poll: May 24, 2017. [<http://www.foxnews.com/politics/interactive/2017/05/24/fox-news-poll-may-24-2017.html>].

<sup>8</sup> According to the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (WCIOM). See [[https://wciom.ru/zh/print\\_q.php?s\\_id=1085&q\\_id=75412&date=10.07.2016](https://wciom.ru/zh/print_q.php?s_id=1085&q_id=75412&date=10.07.2016)]

<sup>9</sup> According to the Levada Center surveys. 12/24/2012 See [<https://www.levada.ru/2012/12/24/2012-god-v-otsenkah-rossiyan-sobytiya-persony/>]

victory in 2016 were considered to be significant by an approximately equal number of Russians. While people's attention to the election of the president of their own country is logical, their comparable interest in foreign news seems less so.

We assume that since the media in Russia are not completely state-independent (Fredheim, 2016; Gehlbach, 2010), they designed the agenda promoted by the political elite, giving such wide coverage to the 2016 U.S. election. Therefore, the intensity of Trump-related discussions in the Russian media may reflect not so much the interest of the people as the position of the Russian authorities towards Trump.

In Russia, as in other countries, the media play an important role in the deproblematization of certain issues (Ibarra & Kitsuse, 2003), for example, economic sanctions (Kazun, 2016) or tragedies, such as mass poisoning with surrogate alcohol (Kazun, Kazun, 2017). We assume that the discussion= about the presidency of Donald Trump could play a similar role. Moreover, the portrayal of the U.S. as an opponent or an ally in particular cases in the Russian press has traditionally influenced public opinion (Petersson & Persson, 2010; Gerber, 2015). Trump's victory and his further actions against Russia were not something predictable for the Russian authorities, therefore, we assume that the tone of the discussions in the media should have changed significantly immediately after the election, and seven months later.

This work provides the first systematic analysis of Trump-related discussions in the Russian media. Some attempts to describe the features of the U.S. election coverage by the Russian media were based primarily on qualitative data and indicated that the tone of the topic was predominantly positive before the election (Slutsky & Gavra, 2017). However, based on quantitative data, we show that the actual Russian press coverage of Trump's activities was far more complex and not necessarily positive. We pay attention to the intensity of the discussion and the tone of the articles on Trump in the Russian press, and draw conclusions on how his position changed in the network coverage.

## **Literature Review**

The media's attention to political events in their own country is natural. Such news is relevant to their citizens and can significantly affect their lives; media attention to foreign events seems less clear. Why would foreign news also attract public attention? On what factors does such interest depend?

Factors determining the number of references to a particular country in international news include the country's characteristics, such as its economic and political power, relations with other countries and perceived economic and political instability (Blondheim, Segev, & Cabrera,

2015). A country's place in the world news agenda has much to do with its size and political influence, economy (Wu, 2007), military potential (Shenhav, Rahat, & Sheaffer, 2012) and population (Rosengren, 1974). International contacts and proximity to other countries are also important. For instance, geographical (Chang, Shoemaker, & Brendlinger, 1987) or cultural (Lee, 2007; Rosengren, 1974) remoteness can lower media interest in a country. Media attention also depends on bilateral trade relations between countries and the nature of the event covered (Shoemaker, Danielian, & Brendlinger, 1991). This naturally higher interest in domestic issues results in a number of countries getting no international media coverage (Horvit, Gade, & Lance, 2013). However, the U.S., being a large and influential country, is at the center of global news flow; events there are actively discussed by the international media (Segev, 2015).

In addition, international media coverage of political processes often leads to greater attention being paid to the activities of political leaders, compared to the attention paid to political parties and organizations (Balmas & Sheaffer, 2013; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Van Aelst, Sheaffer, & Stanyer, 2012). It seems logical that Trump and Clinton attracted a great deal of attention from the Russian media during the 2016 U.S. election. The place of the U.S. in the global system and the political personalization of discussions may have led to an active discussion of the presidential candidates in Russia. Moreover, such features of political processes media coverage may influence foreign public opinion in this country (Entman, 2008).

The other side of political personalization is the media's attention to the personality traits of individual politicians. Such traits as charisma (Pancer, Brown, & Barr, 1999; Sheaffer, 2001), visual appearance (Tsfati, Markowitz Elfassi, & Waismel-Manor, 2010; Waismel-Manor & Tsfati, 2011), and vigorousness (Aaldering & Vliegenthart, 2016), may be as important to the media as their professional skills (Bean, 1993). Therefore, the attention paid to Trump by the U.S. media, which did not correspond with the results of pre-election polls, usually legitimizing the front-runner (Lawrence & Boydston, 2017), can be explained by his personal characteristics. The candidate's active use of new media could also play a role (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; McGregor & Mourão, 2017).

This study is based on the agenda-setting theory, according to which the media has a significant impact on what people consider to be important events (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs, 2014). This concept was first formulated on the basis of data from the 1968 U.S. presidential election campaign, when researchers revealed a correlation between the public's perceptions of the most significant issues in the candidates' programs and the frequency with which these issues were mentioned in the media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The idea was further confirmed by numerous and varied empirical examples (Ader, 1995; Feeley, O'Mally, & Covert, 2016; Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Weaver, McCombs, & Spellman, 1975).

However, agenda-setting hypotheses have not only been tested in a variety of empirical contexts, but they have also been modified (McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 2014). A complement to the idea of the impact of discussions in the media on the perception of the importance of issues, is how the emphasis on certain characteristics of a situation or a public figure would form a public opinion (Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004). This development of the theory was called second-level agenda-setting. The concept of agenda-building focuses on awareness-raising activities of interest groups (Vonbun-Feldbauer & Matthes, 2017), including national leaders (Wanta, 1991) and large corporations (Carroll & McCombs, 2003). Therefore, the discussion of the U.S. election in the Russian media could be deliberately designed by individual interest groups.

To indicate the place of a certain issue on the agenda and its relationship with other issues, the network agenda model (the third level of agenda setting) can be applied, according to which objects (events, public figures) or their characteristics are interconnected in the public mind (McCombs et al., 2014). The first academic article which analyzes network agenda was published in 2012 and described the traits attributed to the Texas gubernatorial election candidates (Guo, 2012). It concluded that the online media agenda must be connected with the social agenda, i.e. links between the problems built by the mass media will be at least partly reproduced in public opinion.

The first studies of network agenda were local in nature and based on a relatively small number of analysis units, whereas subsequently the method was applied at a national level. Researchers analyzed media and social attention to ten key problems faced by society, including economics, politics, national security, environmental protection, and the interconnections among these problems (Vu, Guo, & McCombs, 2014). Attempts were made to study network agenda in China, as a country with limited media freedom (Cheng, 2016; Cheng & Chan, 2015).

Nevertheless, the most promising are the comparative studies of network agenda. An example of such studies is the comparison of the candidates of the 2012 U.S. presidential election (Guo & Vargo, 2015; Kioussis et al., 2015), which demonstrated the difference in issue ownership (Hayes, 2008; Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003; Walgrave, Lefevere, & Nuytemans, 2009) for Obama and Romney and changes in the way people linked candidates with different issues after the presidential campaign. In addition, studies were carried out comparing the network agendas on one issue in different countries (Guo et al., 2015) and in different types of media (Kazun, Kazun, 2017). This study carries out a comparative analysis of Trump's position in the Russian press network agenda at different times.

## Methodology

This study analyzes Trump's position on the Russian press network agenda in three periods: one month before the election (October 9, 2016–November 8, 2016), a month after the election (November 9, 2016–December 9, 2016) and 7 months after the election (June 1, 2017–June 30, 2017). The last period of analysis ends before the meeting of Trump and Putin, in order to avoid its impact on the network agenda.

The network agenda for each of the periods was based on the Integrum database, which contains about 500 Russian magazines and over 250 national newspapers. This study focuses on the discussion in the federal print media, since they are the ones that form the agenda. The sample of articles was performed using 23 keywords (network attributes), including pre-election issues, the U.S. internal agenda, international issues, and topics meaningful for Russian interests. The choice of analysis points is based on their relevance to the political agenda of the U.S. and Russia. Networks were build using matrixes of  $A \times A$  format. Each cell of the matrix reflects the number of times when two network attributes were mentioned simultaneously. Since the direction of attribute connections is irrelevant to our analysis, the network is symmetrical.

The networks include 53,269, 63,679, and 36,000 connections (joint mentions of keywords) for periods before the election, after the election, and 7 months after the election results. The distance between different network points is calculated using an algorithm that considers the strength of the connections among different network nodes. The more often attributes are mentioned together, the closer to each other they are located. The thickness and length of the lines show the strength of connections among different topics, calculated as the number of joint mentions in the print media. A degree centrality indicator was calculated for each network attribute, reflecting the number of connections with other attributes. Degree centrality shows the extent to which any given event is integrated in the context of discussions of other issues.

Additionally, the results of public opinion polls on the U.S. election and Trump carried out by the three leading Russian public opinion research companies (WCIOM, FOM, Levada Center) were used. Data from Medialogia<sup>10</sup>, a company aggregating news from 40,000 Russian-language media, including 2,040 print newspapers, were used for the discussion sentiment analysis. The tone of article (positive, negative or neutral) is determined by automated text processing. Medialogia manually checks the algorithm for 1% of news messages to control its correct operation.

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<sup>10</sup> Medialogia. URL: <http://www.mlg.ru/>

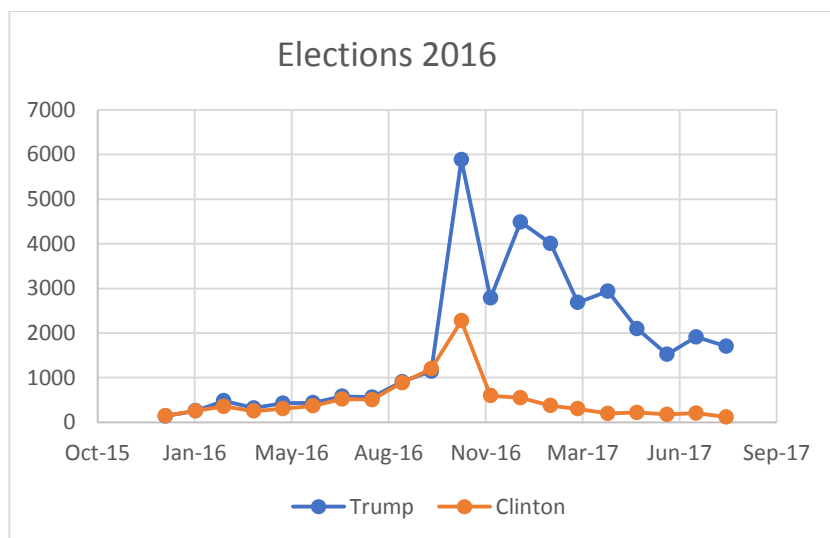
## Results

### *The U.S. election in the Russian media*

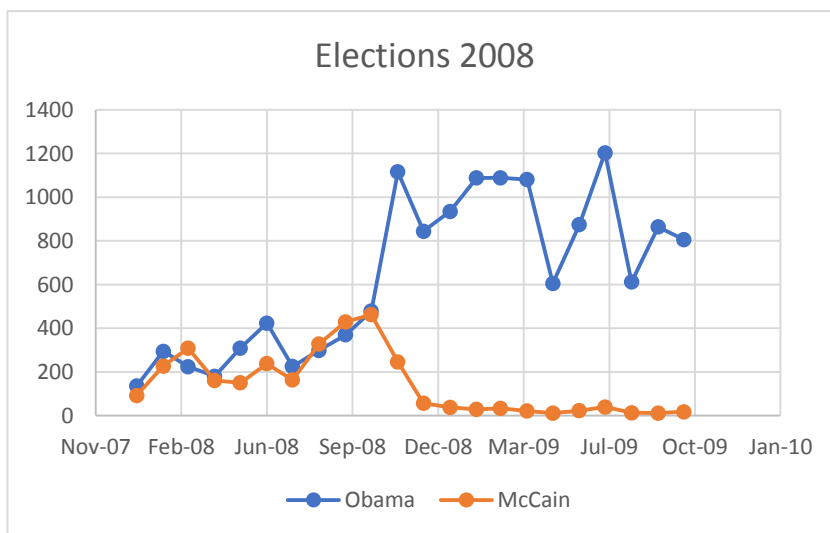
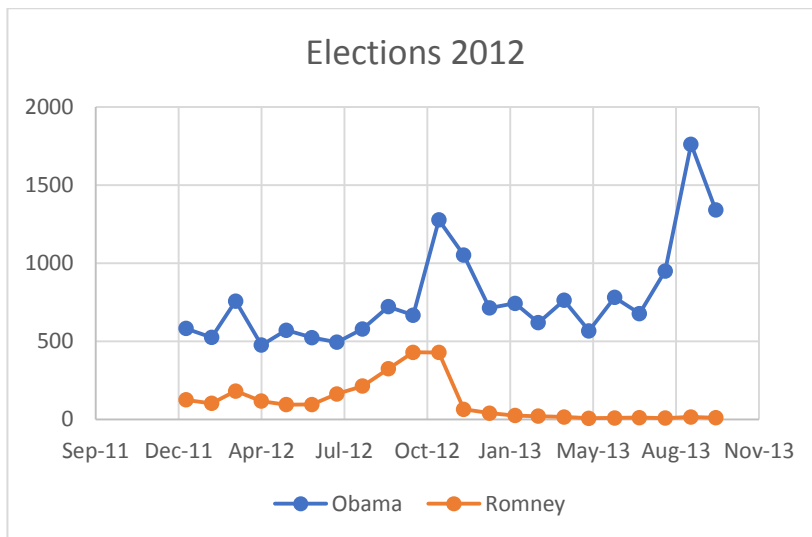
To begin with, it is important to see whether the 2016 U.S. presidential election coverage differed from that of previous elections in the Russian press, or whether a great deal of attention to such events is typical for Russia (see Figure 1).

First, during the election campaign, the Russian media paid approximately equal attention to both main presidential candidates (Obama and John McCain in 2008, Clinton and Trump in 2016). During his second election campaign, Obama received more media attention than his opponent, Romney, since he was the incumbent. Thus, part of the Obama news coverage at the time was connected not with the election, but with his activities as president. Secondly, the Russian media are quick to lose interest in unsuccessful candidates, which is natural, since he or she will have little subsequent significance for international politics. Lastly, the 2012 and 2008 U.S. elections attracted much less attention from the Russian media than that of 2016. Although she lost the election, Clinton was mentioned in more articles than was Obama during both of his campaigns. After his victory Trump received almost three times as much attention as Clinton.

**Figure 1. The intensity of discussion in the Russian media about the U.S. presidential candidates in 2016, 2012, 2008**







The Russian media have followed a similar election-reporting pattern in previous elections, paying equal attention to both U.S. presidential candidates (at least in quantitative terms). However, the 2016 election was covered in more detail than two previous U.S. presidential elections.

This attention to the U.S. election from the Russian media can be explained in various ways. The presidential candidates' personalities could have played a role. During the election campaign, Trump was repeatedly involved in scandals, which would attract additional attention from the population and the media (McManus, 1994). Some studies point out that Trump received so much attention from the U.S. media because of his rhetorical strategies (Hart, 2017) and the way Trump stories performed an entertainment function (Lawrence & Boydston, 2017). This is probably true for the Russian media as well. While Clinton could draw additional attention as a female presidential candidate. While 88% voters were ready to support a female

candidate in the U.S.<sup>11</sup>, in Russia, the majority of the population (54%) were not ready to see a female president in the next 10 or 15 years<sup>12</sup>. Some contradiction between Clinton's candidacy and Russian values could as well stimulate discussion on this issue (Shoemaker et al. 1991).

On the other hand, more important in attracting the attention of Russians to the U.S. election could be the relationship between the two nations, which deteriorated sharply<sup>13</sup> after the annexation of the Crimea in March 2014 (Boyd-Barrett, 2015; Hopf, 2016; Teper, 2015). Russians were hopeful that Trump's presidency would help improve the relationship between the two countries. In July 2016, this opinion was shared by 34% of the population<sup>14</sup>. While the chance of Clinton becoming the next president was less encouraging: only 6% of Russians believed that the relationship between Russia and the U.S. would improve in this case, while 53% shared the opposite view<sup>15</sup>. Thus, the election results were considered to be important for Russia. It seems that better relations between the countries were the reason for a slightly reduced interest of Russians in the previous U.S. elections. The state, influencing the media in Russia, has played an important role in this case. It can be assumed that framing Trump as a friendly-to-Russia presidential candidate could partly deproblematize the complex relationship between the two nations.

### ***Russian public opinion of Trump***

There is a widespread view in the media (Slutsky & Gavra, 2017) that Russia supported Trump in the U.S. election. Let us consider whether this is indeed the case with regard to public opinion polls.

During the U.S. election, several public opinion polls were carried out in Russia regarding the issue, such as the poll where Russians were asked to forecast the relationship between the two countries in the case of Trump's victory (see Table 1). After Trump was elected, in Russia, there was a situation similar to the honeymoon effect (Beckmann & Godfrey, 2007): the public's attitude towards the new president became more positive, because of their great expectations (in November 2016, 48% of the population expected that U.S.-Russia relations would improve, compared with 29% in September 2016). Usually such changes in public opinion can be observed in countries where an election has just been held. However, the

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<sup>11</sup> According to a Gallup Poll. See Jones J. Some Americans Reluctant to Vote for Mormon, 72-Year-Old Presidential Candidates// [http://news.gallup.com/poll/26611/some-americans-reluctant-vote-mormon-72yearold-presidential-candidates.aspx]

<sup>12</sup> According to the Levada Center data. See "Rossiyane protiv zhenshchiny-prezidenta" (Russians Against a Female President). 03.03.2017. [https://www.levada.ru/2017/03/03/rossiyane-protiv-zhenshchiny-prezidenta].

<sup>13</sup> According to the Levada Center data. See Otnoshenie k SShA (Attitude towards the U.S.). [https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/otnoshenie-k-stranam/]

<sup>14</sup> According to the WCIOM poll. 17/10/2016. [https://wciom.ru/zh/print\_q.php?s\_id=1085&q\_id=75415&date=10.07.2016]

<sup>15</sup> According to the WCIOM poll. 17/10/2016. [https://wciom.ru/zh/print\_q.php?s\_id=1085&q\_id=75416&date=10.07.2016]

difficulties in U.S.-Russia relations, which made Trump vs. Clinton so important for Russia, could also contribute to the honeymoon effect.

**Table 1. Expected changes in U.S.–Russia relations after Trump's victory**

	07/10/2016	10/09/2016	11/13/2016
Will rather improve	34%	29%	46%
More likely to deteriorate	12%	8%	3%
Will not change	36%	36%	29%
Difficult to answer	18%	27%	21%

**Note:** The table presents the results of several polls carried out by the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre WCIOM.

Trump's victory and the subsequent Russian media coverage of his victory resulted in few Russians being negative about it: in March 2017, only 7% of Russians perceived the U.S. president negatively (see Table 2). The proportion of Russians who claimed to have a positive attitude to Trump since summer 2016 has also grown a little (from 31% to 38%).

In January 2017, more than half the Russians (55%) noted that U.S.-Russia relations were expected to improve<sup>16</sup>. This was the highest rate since 2006. However, in April 2017, the attitude towards the U.S. president had deteriorated considerably (only 13% of respondents stayed positive) since Trump had failed to meet expectations: not only did he not lift the existing sanctions, but new ones were introduced. Trump's initiative to attack Syria was his most criticized decision in the Russian media. In June 2017, only 29% of Russians expected improvements in relations with the U.S.

**Table 2. The attitude of Russians towards Trump before and after the 2016 U.S. election**

	07.2016	03.2017	04.2017	9-10.07.2017	30-31.07.2017
Rather positive	31	38	13	27	18
Neutral	49	45	38	40	43
Rather negative	15	7	39	22	28
Difficult to answer	5	10	10	11	11

**Note:** The table presents the results of several polls carried out by the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre WCIOM.

The attitude towards Trump improved slightly after his meeting with Putin on July 7, 2017, when the two leaders expressed hope for some improvement in cooperation between their countries. However, this effect on public opinion was brief, and by the end of July the level of trust dropped significantly (from 27% after the meeting to 18% at the end of the same month).

<sup>16</sup> According to the poll of the FOM (Public Opinion Foundation). [<http://fom.ru/Mir/13602>]. The previous peak of positive expectations regarding the United States — Russia relations trends was observed in 2009 after Barack Obama's victory, when 33% of respondents expected improvement.

Public opinion polls show that Russians treated Trump quite well during the election campaign. After his victory, Russians considered him to be a friend until around March 2017. However, he quickly lost this status six months after he was elected. Why did this happen? Since Russians themselves say that economic sanctions had a positive effect on the situation in Russia<sup>17</sup>, the change in the attitude towards Trump cannot be simply explained by some objective influence of his policies on the Russian economy. This is probably just the image that was designed and changed by the Russian media.

### ***Tone of articles on the U.S. election in the Russian press***

Contrary to what a recent study (Slutsky & Gavra, 2017) showed, according to our analysis, the tone of articles mentioning Trump before the election was more negative than positive: his balance rates have never exceeded zero (see Figure 2). For example, an expert from the Kommersant newspaper noted that "*the victory of Donald Trump for Russia is nothing better than that of Hillary Clinton. He is absolutely unpredictable ...*" (Kommersant, 10/13/2016).

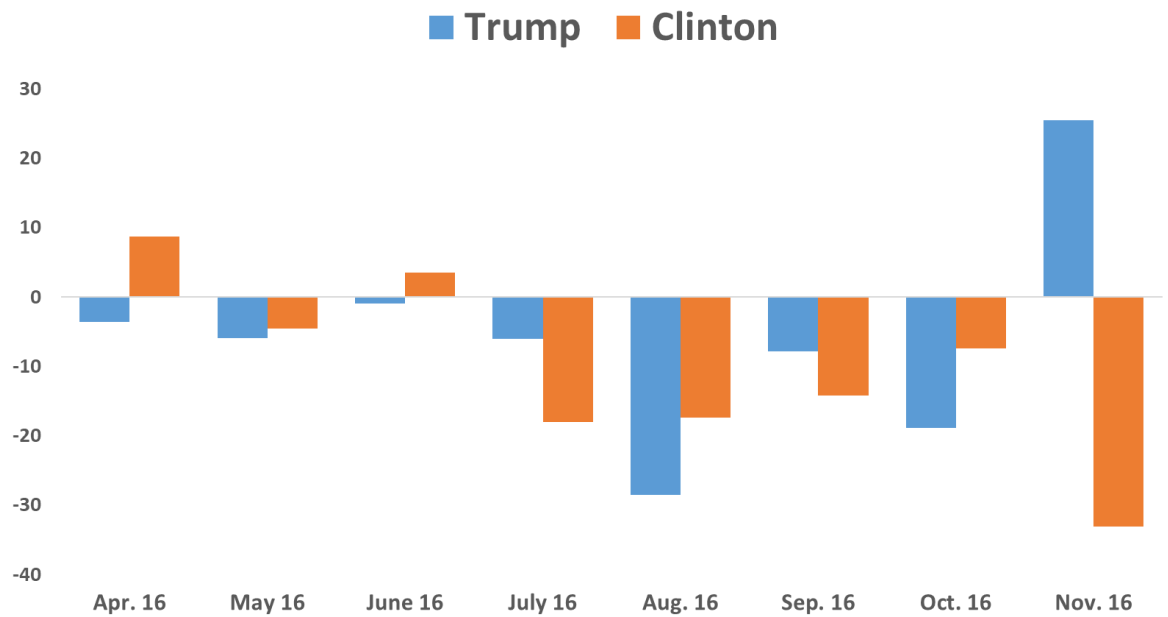
In some months, Clinton's campaign was covered by the Russian press even more positively than Trump's, although in the 4 months prior to the election the articles on the Democratic candidate were mostly critical. During the election, the Russian media gave a lot of negative coverage to both candidates. The situation changed dramatically only after the victory of Trump: the media's coverage of Clinton turned mostly negative, while Trump became a real friend of Russia<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> According to a WCIOM poll, 35% of Russians believed that sanctions imposed against Russia due to the crisis in Ukraine positively affected the country, and 31% replied that they had no effect. [[https://wciom.ru/trzh/print\\_q.php?s\\_id=19&q\\_id=929&date=05.03.2017](https://wciom.ru/trzh/print_q.php?s_id=19&q_id=929&date=05.03.2017)]

<sup>18</sup> According to the Medialogia data, there were no traces of such changes when Barack Obama beat John McCain in 2008, although the latter was rather negative about Russia. The sentiment of the press remained predominantly neutral with respect to both candidates and didn't change much after the election results announcement.

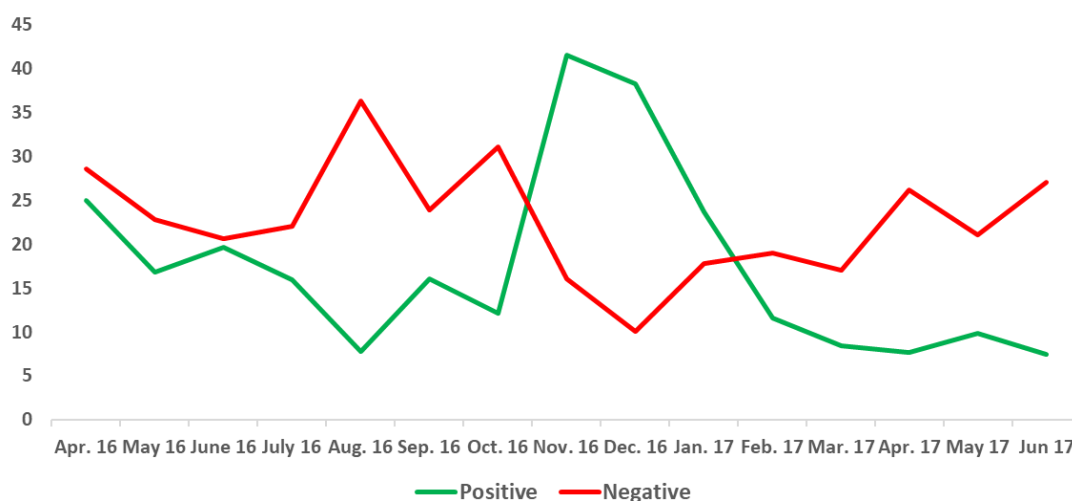
**Figure 2. Balance rates of the articles on Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton in the Russian press from April 2016 to November 2016.**



*Note: a balance rate equals the share of positive articles minus the share of negative articles. The score above zero means there were more positive articles, the score below zero means there were more negative publications.*

Positive news about Trump prevailed in the Russian media only for three months (see Figure 3). In February 2017, the share of negative articles exceeded that of positive articles, and by June 2017 there were practically no positive publications about the new U.S. president. Partly, the greater number of negative stories about a president that was considered to be friendly to Russia, can be explained by the traditionally higher media attention to negative events and unfavorable changes (Blondheim, Segev, & Cabrera, 2015; Harrington, 1989; Leung & Lee, 2015; Shoemaker, 1996).

**Figure 3. The proportion of positive and negative articles on Donald Trump in the Russian press from April 2016 to June 2017.**



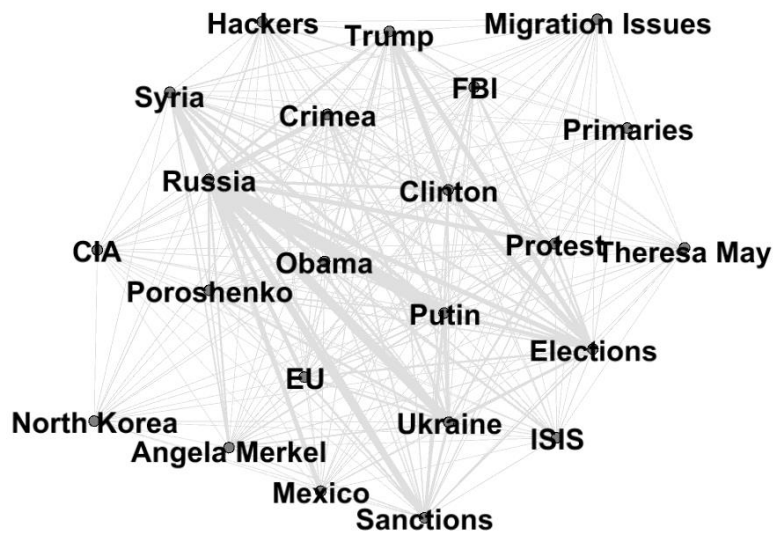
The tone of articles in the media apparently influenced public opinion about Trump. Before the U.S. election, most Russians treated Trump neutrally, but the level of his support grew after his victory. By April 2017, however, public opinion had become negative following changes in the nature of Trump-related news.

It may be concluded that the attitude of the Russian media towards Trump was not clearly positive: it was like this for only a few months after his victory. According to the network agenda theory, the connection of the issue being discussed with other salient issues is important. Let us compare the context in which Trump was mentioned in the Russian press before, immediately after, and in the 7 months after the election, just before his meeting with Putin.

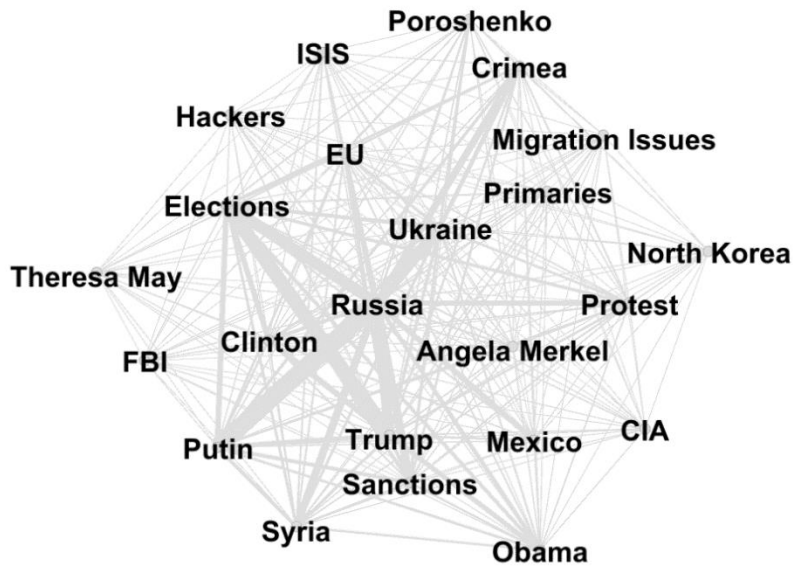
#### **Trump-related discussion in the Russian media network agenda**

In order to analyze the context of the discussions about Trump in the Russian press, we used network analysis (the results are shown in Figures 4, 5, and 7). First of all, it was important to compare the nature of the discussions in the Russian media before and after the election.

*Figure 4. The network agenda of the Russian print media a month before the U.S. election.*



*Figure 5. The network agenda of the Russian print media a month after the U.S. election.*



When comparing these two network agendas, several important conclusions can be drawn. Prior to the election, Trump had significantly less connections with the topic of sanctions than after the election. Before the election Trump was portrayed in the Russian press not as someone who could lift sanctions after and if he won, but as the opponent of Clinton, seen as the one who would most likely be the next U.S. president.

*"At the final stage of the election, it is becoming increasingly clear that Hillary Clinton is not just a Democrat, but the establishment candidate, while Trump is not so much a Republican, as the leader of the anti-Washington and anti-local-bureaucracy crusade."* (October 13, 2011, Nezavisimaya Gazeta).

Trump was important to enhance the negative image of the U.S. election campaign. After Trump's victory one of the leading Russian newspapers wrote, *"None of us believed in the victory of Donald Trump. He seemed like a freak of nature, a jackanapes, a clown, a punching bag for Hillary Clinton."* (November 10, 2016, Moskovskij Komsomolets).

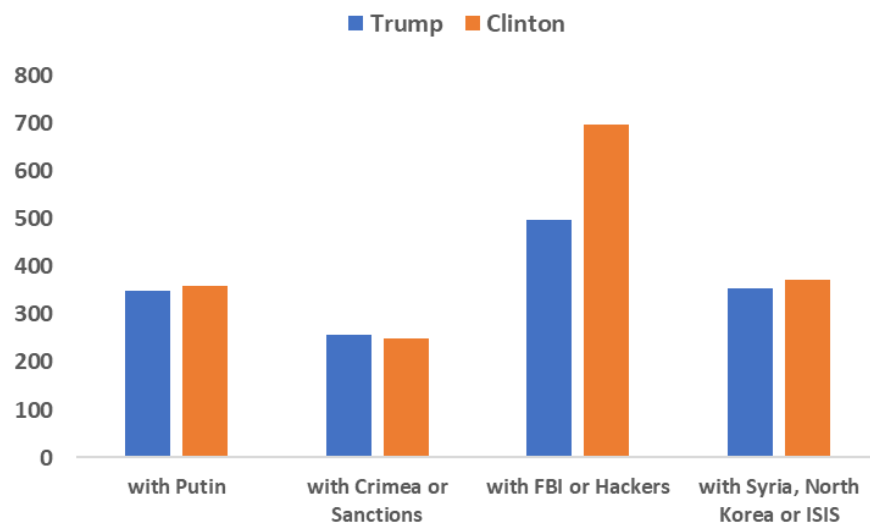
If Clinton, who had negative ratings in Russia, had won, the Russian media could have used Trump's loss to explain why sanctions would not be lifted. Trump, whose ratings were a bit better, would be a useful loser. His defeat would be a good explanation for the continuing cold relations with the U.S., which had chilled after the annexation of Crimea. If Clinton, initially viewed as a candidate unfriendly to Russia, won, it would have legitimized the continuing tense relationship between the countries. However, Trump won, which raised the most natural topic for discussion — the possibility of lifting international sanctions against Russia — an issue that could only be real in the media, but in fact was hardly discussed by politicians.

*"In just a week, investment funds targeting the Russian market attracted a record amount of funds since the introduction of sanctions in the summer of 2014 — more than \$200 million. Against the backdrop of expectations of potential warming of U.S.-Russia relations after Donald Trump was elected president, this brought the Russian market to the front of the emerging markets."* (November 26, 2016, Kommersant)

A comparison of the joint mention of Clinton and Trump with their network attributes before the election shows that the latter had no preponderance on the Russian agenda (see Figure 6). This proves that Trump was not portrayed by the Russian media as a more important candidate than Clinton. The only significant difference between the network agendas of the two presidential candidates was the stronger connection of Clinton with scandalous issues — hackers and the FBI investigation.



**Figure 6. The number of joint mentions of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton with various issues on the network agenda a month before the election.**



From a comparison of the network agendas before and after the election, it is clear that after the election, the Russian media began to separate Trump-related discussions from the issue of the hacking efforts aimed at the U.S. election, which were actively discussed in the U.S.. Before the election, the Russian media freely discussed hacker attacks in the context of the U.S. presidential election. This fits well with the change in Trump's portrayal by the media after his victory. If before the U.S. election, hacking attacks could be seen as another argument that deprived Clinton's success of legitimacy and explains the defeat of the friend-of-Russia Trump, then after his victory, this issue began to contradict the agenda that was being formed. As a result, after Trump's victory, the Russian media preferred not to discuss hacking. It seems that this change in the discussion contributed to shaping public opinion on Russia's interference in the U.S. elections. For example, opinion polls show that most Russians did not believe that their country had somehow influenced the U.S. election results<sup>19</sup>.

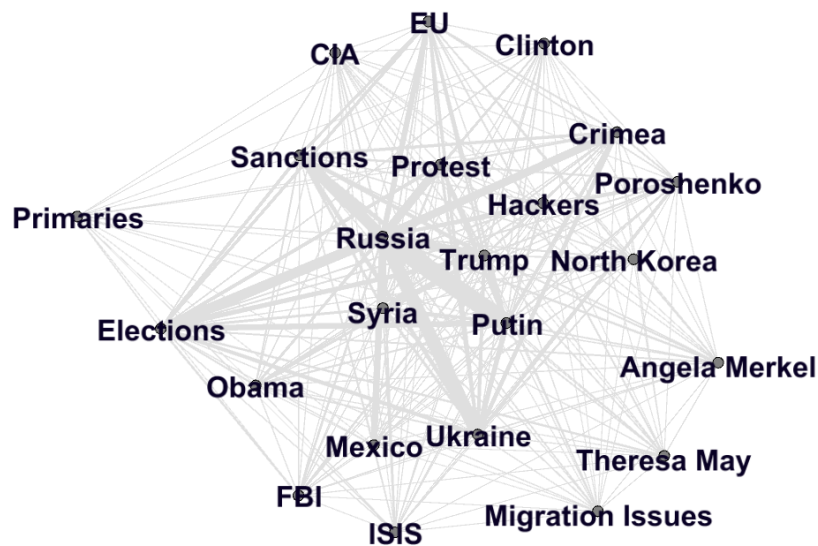
Although the Russian press had been still supporting Trump's positive image and linking him to the prospect of lifting sanctions during the month following the election, the context in which Trump was mentioned changed dramatically in June 2017 (see Figure 7). Trump, Putin and Syria form a triangle at the very center of the network, reflecting the most salient issue of U.S.-Russia interaction at the time. The issue of sanctions has few connections with Donald Trump, as it became clear that dreams about their withdrawal were not being fulfilled. As

<sup>19</sup> According to the Levada Center survey, in January 2017, only 2 % of Russians believed that Russia had definitely interfered in the results of the United States election, while 10 % believed that Russia had rather intervened than not. [https://www.levada.ru/2017/01/26/izbranie-trampa/ing]

Izvestia commented, "It is difficult to expect any breakthrough agreements in the context of the U.S. actions in Syria and rumors about new sanctions against Russia." (April 11, 2017, Izvestia)

At the same time, the media stopped supporting Trump's positive image and began to mention him in the context of protests and hacking attacks.

**Figure 7. The network agenda of the Russian print media in June 2017.**



The network agenda reflects the frequency with which the various issues are mentioned simultaneously, but it is important to complete this picture by indicating that most of the references to Trump in June 2017 were already negative. If before, the joint mentions of Trump and sanctions, or Trump and the Crimea had been positive, then these attributes were mentioned together only to state that nothing was changing for the better for Russia.

### **Discussion**

This study was based on the suggestion that the attitude of Russians towards Trump was shaped not so much by some objective conditions, but rather as a result of a particular image designed by the media. We showed that the context in which Trump was discussed changed several times, which correlates well with the Russian media's objective of promoting a certain point of view of U.S.-Russia relations.

During the Cold War, the USSR portrayed the U.S. as "the other", whose hostile attitude could explain the additional investment in the military and the failure of domestic policies. In Russia, the U.S. often continues to play the same role (Ambrosio, 2016); however, the media sometimes intentionally demonstrate the similarity of the Russian and the U.S. points of view on certain issues (Gerber, 2015).

During the U.S. election campaign, the Russian media, which are largely controlled by the government, sought to maintain an image of Trump that would correspond with the political views of Russia's elite. Although Trump was supported by more Russians than Clinton, his image during the election campaign was neutral rather than positive. He, being "a friend of Russia", was portrayed by the Russian media not as a real frontrunner, but as a critic of the U.S. elite, represented by Clinton. After Trump's defeat, the Russian press could have called the U.S. election predetermined and the new president's policy manifestly hostile to Russia.

However, Trump unexpectedly won, thereby depriving the Russian media of the opportunity to criticize the election results as predetermined and manifestly anti-Russian. As his name and image remained positive for the Russian people, the media continued to support hopes for some improvement in U.S.-Russia relations. It is possible that the Russian elite, partly shaping Trump's portrayal as a friend of Russia, had been cherishing such hopes for some time.

Russians showed unprecedented levels of interest to the 2016 U.S. presidential election compared with these of previous years, which can be explained by the specifics of the context in which the discussion developed — the scandalous nature of the election and the aggravation of conflict with the U.S., which happened in the last years of the Obama presidency. The media could position this election as important for the future of Russia, as Trump's victory could change the situation for the better. If this "friend of Russia" were to lose, it would better correspond with the role that the Russian media had assigned to him. The real policy of the Trump administration eventually resulted in the need to readjust his image, and he quickly lost the status of a friend and ally. Even his personal meeting with Putin could not make a difference.

## **Conclusion**

This study shows that Trump's activities received very different coverage by the Russian media before and after his victory, and seven months after the election. Trump was proclaimed a friend of Russia only after his victory and did not keep this status for long. Trump was interesting for the Russian press and seemed likable to Russians as a critic of the U.S. elite's political agenda; however, as the President of the U.S., he did not live up to the expectations related, above all, to the withdrawal of political and economic sanctions.

The significant changes in the coverage of Trump's activities by the Russian media and the corresponding changes in Russian public opinion, in our view, demonstrate the media's ability to design a particular image of foreign politicians in order to support and promote certain political views. The coverage of the U.S. election campaign and the subsequent policies of Trump in the Russian media is well in line with the changes in the relations between the Russian and American political elites.

In addition, this study shows that a tone analysis of articles can be organically complemented by a comparison of network agendas at different time periods. Trump's position in the Russian press network agenda had been changing following the role and the hopes that were assigned to him.

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