

Reproducing the Imprint of Power: Framing the “Creative Class” in Putin’s Russia

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This textual analysis traces the framing of the 2011–2012 anti-Kremlin protests in Russia by the nation’s most popular tabloid, *Komsomol’skaya Pravda*. The findings show that the otherwise agnostic newspaper came to adopt Vladimir Putin’s rhetoric challenging the protesters, who represented the emerging, Internet-savvy, professional “creative class.” As this tug-of-war over Putin’s political prerogative to define the creative class in contemporary Russia developed in print, the newspaper was transformed from an apolitical, commercial tabloid operating beyond the scope of Putin’s media control into a quasi pro-government organ that would adopt Putin’s framing to marginalize social dissent long after the rallies declined. By examining the newspaper’s development of its pro-Putin interpretive package, this study provides insight into the expansion of neo-Soviet, state–media tensions affecting the ostensibly apolitical sector of commercialized, privately owned press in post-Soviet Russia.

Keywords: framing, creative class, interpretive package, Vladimir Putin, Russia, Komsomol’skaya Pravda

The December 2011 parliamentary elections in Russia, which brought the pro-Kremlin party United Russia the majority of seats, were meant to signal unanimous public support for Vladimir Putin. Instead, on the evening of the election, massive rallies formed in Moscow contesting the election results. Spreading across the nation via social media, the protests became the most vivid display of grassroots democracy since Putin had come to power in 2000 (Jonson, 2015; Oates, 2013). Leveraging the growing popularity of the emerging movement, the protesters soon voiced a wider, anti-Kremlin rhetoric that threatened Putin’s chances for reelection in May 2012 (Sakwa, 2015).

Particularly problematic for the authorities was the fact that the most vocal protesters—educated, Internet-savvy urbanites—openly rejected the state’s claims on their success by referring to themselves as the “creative class.” Borrowed from urbanology studies (Florida, 2002), the term *creative class* refers to a broadly defined group of professionals whose economic function lay in developing new ideas, new technologies, and new content in nonmanufacturing, knowledge-based fields.

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Date submitted: 2017–06–10

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In August 2011, the concept was featured by Putin's advisory team in the country's long-term development plan, Strategy 2020 ("Itogovyy Doklad," 2011). This policy document proclaimed a radical change in relationships between this new emerging class and the state. It posited that leading governments worldwide should start "competing for the representatives of the creative class to form the innovative environment [in their countries]" ("Itogovyy Doklad," 2011, p. 85). As Russia's governing elites projected their new place in the global community, however, they did not consider that such a creative class might be a driver of political, as well as of economic, change. This possibility has been demonstrated empirically by Inglehart and Welzel (2005), who found that, in a postindustrial world, a growing creative class makes a society less inclined to accept an authoritarian ruling style. That is why, when the self-identified representatives of this new class rushed into Moscow's streets in December 2011, four months after the development of the strategy, their challenge to the election should have come as no surprise.

Given the high stakes in this power struggle, the way the ruling elites handled such a challenge became a litmus test of their readiness to tolerate public dissent. The answer came quickly as the protests were handled by officials with arrests and counterdemonstrations attended by Putin supporters in the classic Soviet manner of "voluntary-compulsory" mobilization (Barry, 2011; Sakwa, 2014; Smyth & Oates, 2015).

This study addresses the ways in which the case also became a test of the integrity and autonomy of the Russian media, which have been historically perceived by the state as the main arena for enforcing its political dominance. As the schism between the protesters and the state widened, media outlets with a clear political stance—such as state-run publications and oppositional newspapers—had an arguably easy time taking sides. Their angles in covering the rallies proved to be either explicitly sympathetic toward or critical of the protesters (Popkova, 2014). By contrast, privately run, ostensibly nonpartisan newspapers had to negotiate their journalistic autonomy versus the risks of facing potential sanctions from the state. Impossible to ignore, the protests confronted these outlets with their biggest challenge during the Putin era: negotiating their position in a time of open political contestation and probing the limits of permissible editorial autonomy in that increasingly authoritarian context.

In this context, our study asks how a commercial tabloid, the nation's most popular daily ("Lyubimye Brendy," 2017), *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, responded to this volatile, political moment by handling the government's criticism of its opponents within the political contest to define the creative class. By focusing on the workings of the Russian press's sphere of influence beyond governmental or oppositional media to the realm of the semiautonomous, privately owned, commercially viable popular press, this study responds to a long-standing request for a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between power and the media in contemporary Russia (Azhgikhina, 2007; Burrett, 2010).

Our analysis reveals that, as this coverage developed, the newspaper moved from critiquing the protesters in the apolitical terms of the commercial tabloid to engaging a pro-Putin interpretive package that would marginalize social dissent long after the rallies declined. As a result, the newspaper regressed to its former position supporting the Kremlin, signaling a deepening pattern in neo-Soviet media-state relations.

To situate our analysis of *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* and its coverage of the protests, the article starts with a conceptual overview of state–press relations in post-Soviet Russia. A discussion of framing theory as a conceptual framework for the study follows. Then we present the research questions and an explanation of the study's methodology. Following a textual analysis of the news, we discuss the implications of the case for understanding the relationships between the media and the state in contemporary Russia and present conclusions.

State–Press Relations in Russia: A Brief History

Historically, the Russian press has been seen by the government (both czarist government and, later on, Soviet government) as the main arena for maintaining its political power and shielding the authorities from public scrutiny through censorship and state ownership of news publications (Lipman, 2005; Ruud, 2009). The boundaries of permissible criticism in media coverage started to shift in the late 1980s with the launching of the *glasnost* reforms that abolished prepublication censorship (Azhgikhina, 2011), making the print media a major public platform for discussing previously taboo topics (Azhgikhina, 2007; Roudakova, 2009).

This period did not last long. The economic collapse that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union led to a skyrocketing increase in printing and distribution costs that, coupled with a shortage of consumer advertising, outweighed the newspapers' capacity to generate profits (Azhgikhina, 2007; Lipman, 2005; Roudakova, 2009). This lack of financial viability led media outlets to seek sponsors outside the media industry. Many found such sponsors in newly emerged corporations and wealthy businessmen. Having accumulated significant amounts of capital, often by applying murky schemes (Burrett, 2010), these capital interests ventured into politics as a way to secure their businesses, viewing the news media as a powerful tool for electoral persuasion (Roudakova, 2009).

As this trend developed, it eroded the notion of journalists' being neutral servants of the public interest, discouraged them from viewing themselves as part of a professional community, and resulted in disillusionment among media workers who increasingly started to treat journalistic autonomy as an unattainable ideal (Roudakova, 2009). Notably, during the early post-Soviet period, the central government abstained from interfering with the media, even when the topics they brought up—such as war in Chechnya or corruption (Becker, 2004)—directly concerned cabinet members or Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin (Belin, 2002).

But this more open system started to close when Putin came to power in 2000. Having benefited from electoral support from media magnates himself—including infamous tycoon Boris Berezovsky, who provided Putin with favorable coverage on the major TV channel he partially owned (Dunn, 2014; Strovsky, 2015)—Putin appreciated the potential of the media as a means of political domination (Burrett, 2010) and soon after his election embarked on putting them under control. In one of his first national addresses just a month after his inauguration, the president tellingly categorized the Russian media as either "state" (*gosudarstvennye*) or "antistate" (*antigosudarstvennye*) (Becker, 2004, p. 148). Blaming media-owning oligarchs for "turning the media . . . into a means of struggle against the state" (Coalson, 2000, para. 20), he vowed to free the media from the oligarchs' interference. Yet what the media soon

experienced was not the restoration of the short-lived autonomy of the early post-Soviet years but a return to the realm of state control. Capitalizing on the legal vulnerability of major media owners, whose dubious business practices made them an easy target for selective application of criminal law, the state pressed them into selling their shares to state-controlled oil businesses or industry heavyweights in order to encapsulate the government from public criticism (Becker, 2004; Belin, 2002).

The Neo-Soviet Media: Bridging Soviet and Post-Soviet Media Systems

In a theoretical effort to account for this post-Soviet restructuring of the media landscape, Oates (2007) presented a two-tier typology of contemporary Russian media systems (see also Becker, 2004; Dunn, 2014; Vartanova, 2012; Zassoursky, 2009). Oates (2007) contrasted Russia's contemporary, "neo-Soviet" system to the previous, Soviet model. According to her analysis, one of the most prominent differences between the systems lay in the level of uncertainty and harassment experienced by journalists in contemporary Russia. Although Soviet ruling elites had a low tolerance for dissenting views, the "rules of demarcation about [that] tolerance . . . were clear" (p. 1295).

By contrast, contemporary Russian journalists have had to navigate within the shifting, increasingly tightening boundaries of what is considered acceptable criticism. The tools for maintaining those boundaries include legal mechanisms capitalizing on vaguely formulated legislation that enables government officials to initiate cases against journalists for politically sensitive publications (Kananovich, 2015); financial sanctions (e.g., by imposing fines for violating tax, customs, and fire safety regulations; see Belin, 2002; Vartanova, 2012); and organizational barriers, such as limiting access to sensitive areas or news events (Becker, 2004; Belin, 2002).

Another major difference between the Soviet and neo-Soviet systems was the variation in the degree of governmental influence across media outlets (Oates, 2007). The Russian media system in 2011 was not the monolithic, state-owned entity it was during the Soviet period (Dunn, 2014). Thus, to prevent the media from challenging the political status quo, instead of trying to control each and every media outlet, the state focused on what Gehlbach (2010) aptly called "commanding heights"—or the national television channels, which were the outlets that enjoyed the widest popularity (Volkov & Goncharov, 2014) and had the biggest persuasive appeal (Zassoursky, 2009).

For these outlets, the reassertion of state media ownership by Putin came with a wide range of editorial constraints. These include repeatedly alleged, but never publicly admitted by the Kremlin, weekly meetings of presidential aides with top TV managers (Lipman, 2005), the imposition of "stop lists" of political figures whose presence on air is undesired (Harding, 2009), firings of independent-minded reporters (Beumers, Hutchings, & Rulyova, 2009), and even the cancelation of entire shows (Lipman, 2005). This is not to suggest that the state had to scrupulously supervise TV content in the "manual control" mode to keep broadcasters on message. Like any other learning system, the television journalism community adapted to the rules of the game by increasingly engaging in self-censorship (Mihaylov, 2011), another feature of the neo-Soviet media system (Oates, 2007).

While keeping control of national television, the Kremlin left minor media outlets largely alone. The most prominent of these included the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, the *TV Rain* online-subscription channel, and the radio station *Ekho Moskvy*. By providing an alternative to government-sanctioned reporting, these "pockets of freedom" (Lipman, 2005) served as "safety valves" (Dunn, 2014, p. 1439). They worked by attracting a politically active, liberal-minded, but marginal, audience that could be sequestered within the confines of such tight public spaces.

Finally, what stood between the state-owned media and such unregulated outlets is a category of privately owned media outlets with no publicly declared political affiliation (Toepfl, 2011). Prior to 2011, this was where the majority of non-state-owned, for-profit newspapers operated, including most prominently *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*. Faced with shrinking readership numbers (Lehtisaari, 2015) and increased competition from online media (Vartanova & Smirnov, 2010), these newspapers were challenged with remaining commercially viable within the growing market-driven economy (Vartanova, 2012). In that context, they demonstrated the dynamic created by the combined forces of the Kremlin's political pressures and the prevailing market forces on the Russian media landscape.

On one hand, market forces pushed commercial media outlets to shape their editorial policies to attract audiences that would be most profitable in terms of advertisement revenues. The trajectory of this commercial influence led to growth in such consumer-oriented publications as glossy magazines, tabloids, and lifestyle titles (Becker, 2004). On the other hand, the chilling effect of the tightening space for acceptable criticism of the ruling elites in Russia pushed this tabloidizing tendency out to originally higher-brow publications, which started to allocate more space to lighter topics such as entertainment, erotica, and violent content at the expense of covering socially and politically sensitive topics (Richter, 2008). By generating revenue without the risks of attracting potentially punitive attention from the state, this "commodification of journalistic outputs" (Becker, 2004, p. 142) became a unique by-product of the country's political-economic transformation from the Soviet past to the "authoritarian (not totalitarian) and capitalistic (not socialist) present" (Gehlbach, 2010, p. 78).

This transformation produced a contemporary version of quasi-ideological censorship. In the presence of the state's formal commitment to the legally warranted protection of the freedom of the press, this reflexive version of censorship was exercised not directly by government officials but by media owners and editors. In the former case, where media outlets were just one among their other, predominantly nonmedia assets ("Kto Vladeet," 2014), media owners endorsed ruling elites out of fear of the state's possible repercussions against their other businesses. In the latter case, editors of privately owned newspapers who had little chance of receiving the direct budget subsidies given to state-owned outlets (Makeenko, 2013; Strovsky, 2015) endorsed government positions in the hopes of getting lucrative advertising contracts (and, in the case of some larger publications that had their own publishing houses, printing contracts) from the state as rewards for their loyalty.¹

¹ Between 2011 and 2017, the regional subsidiaries of *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* alone were able to secure more than 1,590 contracts financed from government funds for the total amount exceeding \$33.3 million ("Gospodryadchiki," 2017).

Komsomol'skaya Pravda Adapts to Change

In 2011, *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* exemplified this expanding dynamic of change. Founded by the Communist Party's young wing in 1925, it belonged to the so-called central press—a collection of nationally distributed outlets meant to deliver the official policy of the regime (Richter, 1995). After the demise of the Soviet Union, the newspaper was privatized and, like many other print outlets, was acquired by an industrial group with no proclaimed political allegiances but with alleged ties to the Kremlin ("Grigoriy Berezkin," 2007).

In the financially volatile and increasingly politically authoritarian environment under Putin, *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* revised its originally explicitly political editorial strategy to move away from public affairs to present more entertaining content and advertising (Bindman, 2013). Having entered the post-Soviet period with the reputation of being able to address to its readers in the "Aesopian language" (Azhgikhina, 2007, p. 1250), the newspaper became a publication featuring sensationalist gossip and celebrity news. Despite the sinking subscription rates of comparable national publications (Pietiläinen, 2008), this strategy secured *Komsomol'skaya Pravda's* position as Russia's most popular newspaper (Strovsky, 2015), with about 2.3 million readers of its print daily edition ("Portret Chitatelya," 2018) and 1.5 million website visitors daily ("Ob Izdanii," 2017).

In this transition, the newspaper's tabloidized editorial approach came to embody the key elements required to ensure its commercial success, including the avoidance of contradictory positions and politically sensitive issues to such a degree that *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* has been labeled a prime example of the Russian press's tabloidization (Azhgikhina, 2007; Beumers et al., 2009; Bindman, 2013; Bondarik, 2010). That corporate posture explains the challenge to the newspaper of the 2011–2012 protests during the Putin era, which forced the editors to renegotiate the paper's position in a time of open political contestation and to test the limits of permissible editorial autonomy in the increasingly authoritarian political context. Our study asks how *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* responded to this political challenge.

Framing Theory

In exploring the interplay between the *Komsomol'skaya Pravda's* coverage of the protests and the government's attempts to rhetorically challenge the protesters' agenda, we were guided by the concept of framing. A multidimensional concept (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2012), framing can be defined for the purposes of this study as a process of meaning-making undertaken by various actors, or "frame sponsors" (Gamson, 1992), to provide a coherent and powerful explanation of unfolding events (Entman, 2004). According to Entman (1993),

Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation. (p. 52)

As we show in this study of Putin's effort to dominate the framing of the protesters, such struggles over the meaning of issues and events do not happen in a vacuum. Rather, the media serve as site of conflict on which they unfold. By making their own framing choices, the media can reinforce or challenge the frames sponsored by political actors (Fridkin & Kenney, 2005). In this sense, framing analysis can be thought of as a search for the media process that leaves the "imprint of power" (Entman, 1993, p. 55).

To analyze the framing process that developed at *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* through its coverage of the framing contest over the creative class, this study builds on the constructionist approach of Gamson and Modigliani (1989). They focused on "interpretive packages" that can be operationalized as a set of five framing devices—"(1) metaphors, (2) exemplars (i.e., historical examples from which lessons can be drawn), (3) catchphrases, (4) depictions, and (5) visual images" (p. 3)—and three reasoning devices that are meant to justify what should be done about a given issue: its roots, consequences, and related "appeals to principle (i.e., a set of moral claims)" (p. 4). The authors explained that "a package can be summarized in a *signature matrix* that states the frame, the range of positions, and the eight different types of signature elements that suggest this core in a condensed manner" (p. 4, emphasis added).

Where critical framing theory complements constructionist approaches, we have also considered various universal framing devices that have been historically used by the media in framing social protest. These include trivialization, an emphasis on internal dissension, marginalization, reliance on statements by authorities, delegitimizing use of quotation marks, featuring the protesters' disruptive actions, and focusing on superficial details (Gitlin, 1980/2003, pp. 27–28; see also Ashley & Olson, 1998; Brasted, 2005; Dardis, 2006).

Based on this conceptual framework, our study asked the following research questions: What was the trajectory of *Komsomol'skaya Pravda's* framing of the creative class in its coverage of the 2011–2012 political protests? What does the pattern of that framing process show about the newspaper's response to the Putin government's and to Putin's own commentary on the protests? How can understanding the relationship between Putin's framing process and that of *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* inform our theoretical understanding of contemporary media–state power relations in Putin's neo-Soviet Russia?

Method

Using the search engine embedded in the *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* website, we retrieved all articles mentioning the term "creative class." The time frame for the search was January 1, 2011, the year the term was first introduced into the Russian media discourse by political elites, to December 1, 2014. The end point was determined by the latest peak in searches for the phrase "creative class" registered among Russian Internet users according to Google Trends data ("Search Request," 2017). This search produced a total of 53 articles. To analyze the framing of the protesters prior to the emergence of the "creative class" label, an additional search of the same database for the term "protests" was conducted for the period of protest actions—from December 4, 2011, to April 5, 2012, the day when the "creative class" was first mentioned in the protest context. This search produced 10 additional items for a total of 63 articles, which included both news stories and editorial- and column-based content.

To analyze the newspaper's framing of the creative class, one of the authors, who is a native Russian speaker and scholar, read the 63 articles. The contents of the articles were discussed by the authors in extensive face-to-face interpretive sessions, where translations were challenged and discussed until agreement was reached about the meanings of the articles' framing devices. This allowed us to mitigate the risk of losing the expressive shades of meaning due to the "lost in translation" problem (van Nes, Abma, Jonsson, & Deeg, 2010) while sensitizing us to the broader, culturally specific underpinnings of the framing process that developed in the news texts. In our analysis, we refer directly to 27 of these articles by providing examples of the texts that were representative of the trajectory of the *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* coverage.

Further, to ground our analysis of the government's framing rhetoric about the creative class as it came to affect *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, we analyzed the public statements about the protesters made by Vladimir Putin as the major frame sponsor representing the nation's ruling elites. These included the transcripts which we retrieved from the official websites of the presidential administration and the state-owned newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, which functions as the official publication of the Russian government (e.g., "Poslanie Prezidenta," 2012; "Predsedatel' Pravitel'stva," 2011; "Stenogramma," 2011). The excerpts of the statements pertaining to the creative class were also translated by the Russian-speaking author and discussed during face-to-face sessions. In juxtaposing these sources, we have been able to trace the government's developing rhetoric surrounding the protests and, centrally, the newspaper's reaction to it.

Analysis

The first of the next two sections presents an analysis of Putin's various public statements about the protesters to establish the "signature matrix" of his counterframe of the protesters based on framing and reasoning devices found in those texts. Based on that pattern, we describe in the second section how *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* adapted its position toward Putin and against the protesters as its framing of events developed.

Ruling Elites Reframe the Creative Class

The refusal by the protesting creative class to show loyalty to Putin provoked the Russian government to develop a counterframe. They took that corrective step to redeem their original frame of the creative class as the nation's main asset—a frame that had been proposed in the Strategy 2020 document ("Itogovyy Doklad," 2011). As this contest drew on into 2012, Putin constructed an increasingly negative—and ultimately successful—"interpretive package" that reflected the complete range of framing and reasoning devices described.

Putin initiated this effort during his annually televised program, *Direct Line With the Nation*, on December 15, 2011, just 11 days after the first protests. His explanation of the roiling public dissent reflected his apparent assumption that the roots (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989) of the protests were false. Here he marginalized the sincerity of the rank-and-file protesters by using delegitimizing quotation marks

to say that the reason the protesters went out to the squares in Moscow was to “‘supposedly’ demonstrate their dissatisfaction with how they are treated by authorities” (“Stenogramma,” 2011).

By featuring the protesters’ disruptive actions, Putin suggested that their true motives lay not in contesting the results of the parliamentary elections but in delegitimizing the upcoming presidential campaign. He further alleged that this insurgency was being financially supported by “external forces,” a thinly veiled jab at the United States, to whom he referred only as “a foreign nation” (“Stenogramma,” 2011). While allusions to foreign interference in Russian elections continued to appear in Putin’s later statements, at one point he directly suggested that the person who had “set the tone for certain actors inside the country” was Hillary Clinton (“Predsedatel’ Pravitel’sstva,” 2011).

In his further attempts to marginalize the protesters, Putin used the metaphor of Rudyard Kipling’s (1985) hapless “bandar-logs” to describe the protesters. He said, “We will try to establish contact with [the protesters]. Often, this is useless and impossible. What can one say in this case? One can say at the end, ‘Come to me, *bandar-logs*.’ I have loved Kipling since childhood” (“Stenogramma,” 2011, para. 508).

In depicting the protesters as the fantasy creatures of Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*, Putin surely understood that many Russians had been raised, if not on the book, then on the animated Soviet movie of the story. By tapping that powerful visual metaphor, he was comparing the protesters to the daft, but malicious, monkey-like bandar-logs who communicated by repeating other animals’ speech. Further, by invoking this reference, he was pushing his point about the protesters, because many Russians knew that the bandar-logs were eventually hypnotized and eaten by the wise Python Kaa, who had lured them with a phrase remarkably similar to one uttered by Putin in his statement, “Bandar-logs . . . come [to me] one step closer” (Kipling, 1985, p. 223). Playing to his national audience, Putin pitched this catchphrase as if to suggest that he was a wily and, thus, more dependable leader than his opponents (Akhmetova, 2012).

As the protests grew, Putin’s rhetoric turned increasingly to an appeal to principles (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Among the most prominent of those were appeals to morality and stability—values identified by a recent national poll as favored by the majority of Russians (Sharkov, 2016). The interplay of these principles became particularly evident in Putin’s presidential campaign platform published on February 12, 2012. Seeking to resolve the tension between his initial framing of the creative class as drivers of the new Russia and the counterclaims to that status by the antiregime protesters, Putin’s presidential platform anointed the genuine creative class. It declared, “In any country, teachers and doctors, scientists and culture workers are not just the backbone of the ‘creative class.’ They are the ones who provide *stability* to societal development and serve as a foundation of public *morality*” (“Statya Putina,” 2012, emphasis added). Putin repeated this claim in December 2012 in his address to the Parliament after his reelection (“Poslanie Prezidenta,” 2012).

But this new frame of the creative class could not have contradicted the original meaning of the term more. In Florida’s (2002) definition, the function of the creative class lies not in sustaining but in challenging conventional societal practices with innovative ideas. Putin, however, seems to have understood that his populist audience would not have been concerned with definitional nuances. As a

result, the self-appointed creative class found itself compared to Putin's "true" representatives in terms that implied the contemporary class conflict between the two groups.

In that sense, Putin's rhetoric developed following Russian tradition. Class conflict has been an integral part of Russian public discourse since the 1917 Revolution (Moss, 2004, p. 199) and was evoked by the authorities strategically, depending on the outcome they intended to achieve:

Th[e] rhetoric of class . . . was not marxist [*sic*] in a doctrinally pure sense: rather than differentiate social classes carefully, it played on the deeply rooted idiom in popular culture that pitted "those at the bottom" (*nizy*) against "those at the top" (*verkhi*). Moreover, the distinction between [the classes] was frequently blurred in this rhetoric by a populist preference for terms like "toilers" (*trudiashchiesia*) who were cast in dichotomous fashion against the "burzhui" and "gentlemen" (*gospoda*). (Smith, 2008, p. 178)

In Putin's hands, this rhetoric of class was intended to ostracize the protesters permanently. In November 2013, while seeking to attribute responsibility for Russia's failed education reforms, he blamed representatives of the self-described creative class for "worming themselves into the Ministry of Education" to sabotage reforms (Smirnov, 2013). Further, he accused them of leaving teachers, the "backbone" representatives of this patriotic class, impoverished and burdened with administrative duties (Smirnov, 2013). In a sign of Putin's dominant framing, in December 2013, Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, an institution closely affiliated with the state, criticized "the so-called 'creative class'" (Bas, 2013, para. 4) "for its contempt for the Russian people" (Bas, 2013, para. 1).

In choosing to define its power through the negation of its opponents, Putin's regime relied on "negative ideology"—a strategy justifying the ruling elites' dominance and masking their apparent policy-making failures by nurturing new or playing on historically familiar cleavages (Shlapentokh & Woods, 2004). Most importantly, though, adopting this strategy freed these elites from pursuing any consistent ideological stance (Prozorov, 2008). In this way, the negation of everything but "state power values," which Putin had earlier described as the state versus antistate media dichotomy (Becker, 2004), became the driver of the government's narrative.

The next section of the analysis examines the trajectory of the coverage of the protests by *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* as Putin's framing strategy unfolded.

News Coverage of the Creative Class in Komsomol'skaya Pravda

To explain the gradual pull of Putin's frame sponsorship on *Komsomol'skaya Pravda's* framing of the protests, we have arranged this analysis to illustrate four phases: (1) the newspaper's initially noncommittal reportage of the protests in December 2011; (2) its adoption of Putin's negative frame of the protesters but not of the term "creative class"; (3) the newspaper's adoption in February 2012 of Putin's definition of the creative class, which included his supporters and excluded his opponents; and, finally, (4) the newspaper's continuation after the protests as a repoliticized outlet, which was signaled by

its ongoing, exclusive reproduction of Putin's creative class frame (see Figure 1). We account for the development of the newspaper's pro-Putin interpretive package in the following analysis.

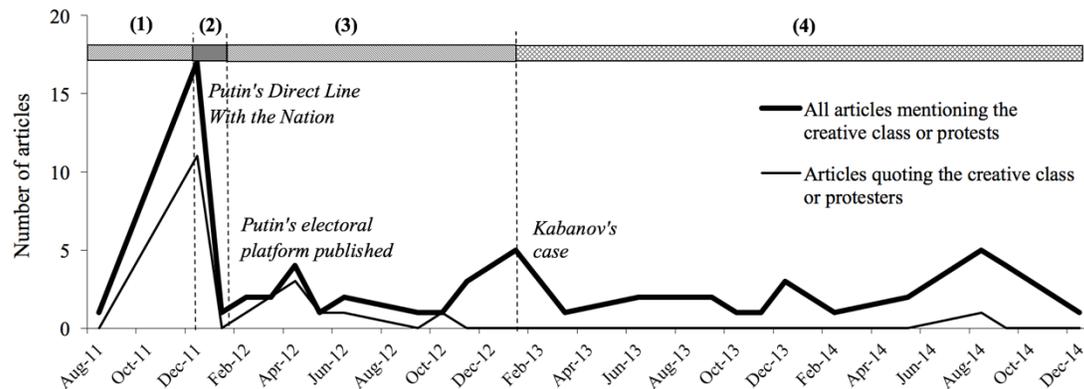


Figure 1. Trajectory of Komsomol'skaya Pravda's coverage of the creative class. Phases in Komsomol'skaya Pravda's framing process: (1) ambiguous balance; (2) adoption of Putin's frame but not the name; (3) acceptance of Putin's challenge to the protesters' use of the term "creative class"; (4) Komsomol'skaya Pravda advances the frame independently.

1. An Ambiguous Balance in the News

In the first days of December 2011 when the protests were starting to spread from Moscow and St. Petersburg to other cities, the Putin government was unprepared to respond. As a result, it reacted to this unfolding crisis by sending conflicting messages (see, e.g., Barry, 2011; "Narod Protiv," 2011; Ovchinnikov, 2011b). In the absence of a clear message from government elites and the silence about the protests on the two major state-run television channels during the first days of the unrest (Mihaylov, 2011; Popkova, 2014), reporters at *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* took neither side. Instead, the tabloid achieved a kind of equanimity by relying on universal framing devices that have been historically used for portraying social protests (Ashley & Olson, 1998; Brasted, 2005; Dardis, 2006; Gitlin, 1980/2003).

Of these devices, the delegitimizing use of figurative quotation marks occurred most frequently. The majority of such references revealed the newspaper's trivializing interpretation of the nature of the events. Examples included phrases describing the anti-Putin protests as "timid shoots of democracy," as petulant actions against "unfair elections," and as a "democratic revolution" (Vorsobin, 2011). In other cases, reporters signaled their disdain for the protesters' motives by calling them "antiregime fighters," "political prisoners," and "rebels"—again, in figurative quotation marks (Grishin, 2011a; Ryabcev, Alyohina, & Suprychyova, 2011; Vorsobin, 2011; "Zapad Provyol," 2011).

To further diminish the political importance of the protests, *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* also relied on metaphors that emphasized the disorderliness and the theatricality of the events, calling them "turmoil

raised in the Russian cyberspace," a "social media rebellion," a "weird spectacle," a "phantasmagoria," and "theatricism" (Grishin, 2011c; Koc, 2011; Vorsobin, 2011; "Zapad Provyol," 2011).

In this early absence of clear signals from the ruling elites, the newspaper subjected the ongoing pro-Putin protests to similarly pejorative framing. In its coverage of a pro-government counter-rally held on December 6, 2011, the newspaper described its participants as equally disruptive because of their unusual appearance and goals. Referring to the drums the pro-government protesters brought with them, photo captions read, "A heap of broken drums is all that has been left from the rally in Triumfal'naya [Square]" (Grishin, 2011c) and "Without their drums, this circus has lost part of its allure" (Vorsobin, 2011).

One reporter went further to mock the pro-government protesters' bombastic statements, writing, "They say they came responding to the call of their hearts—to save their Motherland from the Orange plague [and f]rom the shills who were bought by Washington" (Vorsobin, 2011). By portraying pro-Putin protesters as disparaging the Orange Revolution, the story evoked a series of protests that had taken place in Maidan Square in Kiev, Ukraine, in the aftermath of the first runoff of the 2004 presidential election and that had eventually brought a proliberal candidate to power (Karatnycky, 2005). Through this reference, the newspaper portrayed Putin supporters as disparaging the kind of productive social dissent that could bring about productive political outcomes and ridiculed them for spreading conspiracy claims falsely.

Visual images also played a role in constructing this interpretive package in terms of the newspaper's ambivalence. One photo, which presented a close-up of two protesters—one progovernment and one from the opposition, both wearing remarkably similar winter hats—suggested that both sides were equally deserving of criticism. Shown facing each other in profile with their mouths wide open, the men mirrored each other's frowning expressions of fury and passion. The caption for the photo read, "A 'Nashist' and an opposition member in Bolotnaya Square on Tuesday."² Beneath the photo, the caption offered a traditional Russian maxim, "As they say in children's journals, 'Find ten differences.' Or one, at least" (Grishin, 2011c).

2. Komsomol'skaya Pravda Adopts Putin's Frame, but Not the Name

The initial phase of editorial balance did not last long beyond December 15, when Putin described the protests in explicitly negative terms and framed the protesters as immature dupes motivated by a malicious foreign plot. At this point, *Komsomol'skaya Pravda's* editorial position began to incorporate Putin's frame. On February 10, 2012, for example, the newspaper described the anti-Putin protesters as "net hamsters" ("Iz Terroristov," 2012). This popular epithet from the Russian-speaking blogosphere referred to simpleminded, easily manipulated followers of popular blogs (Antonova, 2011). The tag resonated with Putin's earlier bandar-log metaphor to trivialize the protesters as foolish creatures who were mindlessly repeating the words of others ("Vladimir Putin," 2011).

² *Nashist* is a colloquialism used to denote a member of the Nashi ("Ours"), a political movement created by the presidential administration. Phonetically close to the word *fascist*, this play on words can be viewed as a disparaging framing device of its own.

Whether through references to “bandar-logs,” “net hamsters,” or “angry Internet revolutionaries” (Ovchinnikov, 2011a), the increasing use of metaphors by *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* pointed to its acceptance of the broader governmental strategy of co-opting political humor to trivialize its opponents. A recent addition to the repertoire of other authoritarian post-Soviet regimes (Pearce & Hajizada, 2014), this strategy seeks to take advantage of the capacity of political humor to generate memes as “unit[s] of cultural transmission” (Dawkins, 1990, p. 192) that can communicate a socially resonant message in the form of a “nationwide inside joke” (Milner, 2013b).

This does not suggest, however, that memes disallow the possibility of contestation. To the contrary, because they spread by imitation as well as transformation (Shifman, 2013), the original meme can be challenged and appropriated (Milner, 2013c). With that in mind, it seems only natural that the protesters attempted to save one of the most visible of the ridiculing memes, “net hamster,” from derisive connotation by ironically using it as a self-designator (Grishin, 2011b; Ovchinnikov, 2011a). However, as our analysis reveals, this strategy made the protesters even more vulnerable to disparaging framing.

A photograph in *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* (“Iz Terroristov,” 2012) depicted three protesters dressed up as hamster mascots towering above a live brown bear sitting on an ice-covered sidewalk during a February protest in Moscow. Their posters read, “We are for fair elections” and “We have woken up,” referring, respectively, to the key point of the protesters’ agenda and their potential for collective action. In typical fashion, the protesters’ parody of their dismissive portrayal was derailed by *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* by the caption, which read, “Net hamsters, symbols of the Moscow protests, surrounded a poor bear, a mascot of *United Russia*. They have not understood yet that under the slogan, ‘For fair elections,’ they are actually being used for completely different purposes” (“Iz Terroristov,” 2012).

This example is instructive in a number of aspects. First, it points to the limited opportunities of delegitimized groups to contest a disparaging meme in texts that they do not hold authorship over, such as newspapers. No matter how potent those contestation attempts are, the ultimate authority to contextualize and interpret them remains with newspaper staff, via—in this example—such simple devices as captioning visuals. In a sense, this centuries-old news production practice—with photo captions being one of the few pieces of information read in a newspaper text to completion (Quinn, 2015)—becomes a powerful tool for the reappropriation of the already-appropriated meme, akin to Milner’s (2013a) description of the “double muting” of the marginalized groups’ message found in demotivational posters, which, like photo captions, afford the last say to whoever writes the caption.

The second insight provided by this example involves a change in the trajectory of *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* signaled by the appearance of two reasoning devices that strongly resonated with the allegations prompted by Putin during his *Direct Line With the Nation*: the concealment of the true rationale behind the rallies from rank-and-file protesters and the involvement of foreign nations in encouraging the protests. Whereas, as we have demonstrated, an earlier news report had made light of government supporters’ claims that the protesters were “underwritten by Washington” (Vorsobin, 2011), this time the idea that the protesters were being paid to hold rallies was suggested in the caption by the newspaper’s reporters (“Iz Terroristov,” 2012). This was not the only time the protesters’ motivation was questioned. In a similar derisive fashion, another reporter commented on a rally, “There were pieces of

paper stuck on the boys' jackets that read, 'I am participating in the rally at my own expense.' So you say!" (Ovchinnikov, 2011a).

Still, despite employing a wide range of metaphorical descriptors used to designate the protesters, at this point *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* resisted using the name "creative class," although it was being increasingly claimed by the protesters (Gessen, 2012; Taroshchina, 2011). The newspaper's hesitation to take a firm position about the term reflected the high political stakes of the moment.

3. Accepting Putin's Challenge to the Protesters' Use of "Creative Class"

Beyond impugning the protesters' patriotism, the next phase of *Komsomolskaya Pravda's* framing process showed the newspaper's complete acceptance of Putin's challenge to the movement and of his definition of the "creative class" label. In translating Putin's full "signature matrix" to its pages, the newspaper embraced the president's frame on February 13, 2012—the same day that Putin's electoral platform appeared to discredit the protesters' usage of the term in favor of his own designated "creative class."

Additionally, at this time the news coverage adopted Putin's reasoned appeals to morality by portraying protesters as violating norms of accepted behavior by being "egoists" (Virabov, 2012), "organizing Internet persecutions" (Pyatnitskaya & Khozhateleva, 2012) of their opponents, and even "humiliating the police, as only they could" (Ovchinnikov, 2012). Sometimes the devices used to suggest this deviance were more subtle. One photo caption described one of the protesters, a famous socialite and TV personality, Kseniya Sobchak, as "arriv[ing] to an interrogation at the Investigating Committee of the Russian Federation wearing Ugg boots" (Grishin, 2012b). The insinuation was that such informal dress was somehow inappropriate in the presence of the state authorities.

In its coverage of the rallies, which declined in scope and scale after Putin's reelection in May 2012 (Greene, 2013), the newspaper continued to promote Putin's frame by trivializing the role of the detentions and prison sentences imposed on the protesters (Weir, 2012). The newspaper editorialized that, "The country has not been inspired with the opposition's ideas and has effectively sabotaged the protesters' efforts" (Grishin, 2012a).

4. Completing the Transformation: Komsomol'skaya Pravda Advances the Frame Independently

To complete its transformation from an apolitical tabloid to a de facto organ of the state, *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* championed its newfound traditional role as a patriotic hero by demonizing the villainous protesters. If our charting the arc of the newspaper's rhetorical shift from December 2011 through February 2012 were not enough to make this case, in 2013, *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* further emphasized its internalization of Putin's frame in its coverage of the creative class by seizing on the story of an actual criminal, a murderer. The murder victim was a young woman, a part-time journalist and mother of three, Irina Kabanova. She had been killed by her husband, Aleksey, a former restaurant owner and an editor for an independent media outlet, in January 2013 in Moscow (Martynov, 2013). In its

coverage of the case, *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* made the Kabanovs an exemplar of the protesters' degenerate version of the creative class. According to the newspaper,

The Kabanovs were considered the model representatives of the "creative class"—both were involved in intellectual activities, tried to open their own business (a café for *kreakly*, like themselves), actively participated in the . . . protests, [and] were social media users. ("Nadvigayuschayasya Tragediya," 2013, para. 3)

According to another article (Martynov, 2013), the Kabanov story encapsulated "the end of the 'creative class,'" or "*kreakly*." This neologism, which would have sounded odd to the Russian ear, was introduced in the Kabanov case's coverage as a catchphrase used to impugn a group of people whom the columnist called, "We-were-on-Bolotnaya" protesters (Martynov, 2013). By categorizing Kabanov as a villain whose faults could be generalized to the entire creative class, *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* completed its framing of the movement-based creative class as outsiders in Russian society. From this point forward, the term "creative class"—or its shorter version, *kreakly*—became the newspaper's preferred negative catchphrase (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989) for the protesters. When *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* needed to castigate an individual or a group of people for being aloof from the "ordinary people," it invoked that label, often in terms of the "liberal loquacious minority," "blah-blah-fighters against the regime" (Mihaylova, 2013), and in contrast to the "silent majority" (Voskoboynikov, 2013).

After January 2013, when the movement died out, *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* continued to refer to the creative class in Putin's terms. In its coverage following the Kabanov case, the newspaper's regular references to this interpretive package offered the state another media outlet working to marginalize dissent in general (see Figure 1). *Komsomol'skaya Pravda's* coverage continued to resonate with the signals sent by the state in response to subsequent events. In 2014, when Russia's questionable annexation of Crimea and support for separatist forces in Eastern Ukraine was rejected by bloggers and social media users, for example, the newspaper labeled their criticisms "infantile sermons" ("Nacionalizaciya," 2014), citing the dissidents as evidence that the protesting creative class was "terribly far from the people" (Grishin, 2014).

In this vein, when the sanctions imposed by Western nations in response to Russia's aggression led to the disappearance of certain foreign food products in Russia, *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* framed this issue as not affecting ordinary citizens but as manifesting the upcoming "starvation of the creative class." The sanctions were framed as punishment for their having gotten used to consuming products "that appear on the tables of ordinary Russians only on holidays. Or do not appear at all" (Tukhanina, 2014). In a similar vein, *kreakly* were criticized for questioning the Soviet Union's military strategy during World War II (Steshin, 2014). Putin has typically portrayed Soviets' sacrifice as the sacred premise for the regime's international military actions (Filipov, 2017).

In another notable development of this period, as *kreakly's* views were increasingly criticized, their presence on *Komsomol'skaya Pravda's* pages fell off almost completely. Just one article out of the 27 published in that period quoted a creative class member directly. In a way, this development epitomized the entire trajectory of the newspaper's framing. Despite the many metaphors and degrading

catchphrases attached to the creative class and *Komsomol'skaya Pravda's* allegedly in-depth analyses of their supposedly harmful agenda, the coverage of the regime's opponents remained essentially devoid of content, negating their very right to function as legitimate "counterframe sponsors." As a result, the newspaper reinforced the discursive power of Putin and his surrogates to conform to the "negative ideology" the Kremlin pursued.

Discussion and Conclusions

Prior to the December 2011 protests, *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* had been increasingly moving away from political coverage in favor of entertainment-related content in the hope of escaping potentially unwanted attention from the state. This strategy seemed plausible, given the government's focus on controlling the much larger national television system and its inattention to commercial publications such as *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* (Gehlbach, 2010; Volkov & Goncharov, 2014). Instead, our analysis of *Komsomol'skaya Pravda's* coverage of the protests shows that, rather than remaining disengaged politically, this privatized newspaper submitted to the resurgent pull of the neo-Soviet media system (Oates, 2007) that the president evoked in his attacks on the protesters.

Putin had previously promised to liberate the "nonstate" press, including *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, from the oligarchs' influence (Coalson, 2000). Yet, by examining the news coverage of the protests, it is evident that it was Putin—not the oligarchs—who came to dominate *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*. In that sense, he led the commercial press back into the neo-Soviet sphere of control. It seems reasonable to connect Putin's agitation at the protesters to his need to recoup more of the Russian media as powerful assets for perpetuating his electoral career. As we have shown, the commercial press, which over the post-Soviet years had come to disbelieve in objectivity as a working, attainable standard of journalistic reporting (Roudakova, 2009), could not stand up to the tensions created by the open political conflicts of 2011–2012.

Instead, in their coverage of the protests, journalists at *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* navigated the quickly shifting boundaries of acceptable criticism of the state by falling in line with Putin's increasing presence and by subjecting themselves to self-imposed censorship. In the trajectory of the newspaper's coverage, the only period when *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* exercised any autonomy from the government was in early December 2011, when the protests were drawing their first supporters into the streets and political elites were sending conflicting signals about the events. Given the initial absence of a clear message from the government, reporters at the newspaper relied on framing devices that had been traditionally used by media in Russia and elsewhere (Ashley & Olson, 1998; Brasted, 2005; Dardis, 2006; Gitlin, 1980/2003) to cover dissent, subjecting the pro- and antigovernment protesters to equally pejorative framing.

Yet, when the cry of political dissent rose high enough to threaten the regime and Putin's commentary emerged to declare the boundaries of acceptable criticism, the erstwhile apolitical press became pulled deeply into the Russian state's orbit by embracing the culturally and historically specific framing devices that manifested Putin's "signature matrix" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989), making his "imprint of power" (Entman, 1993) increasingly evident on *Komsomol'skaya Pravda's* pages. As a result, even beyond the period of this political crisis, the newspaper's interaction with Putin's framing process led to the

newspaper's sponsoring the lasting negative frame of the anti-Putin, creative class protesters that served to marginalize political dissent in a variety of contexts from domestic affairs to international relations.

Although we have shown the powerful framing process produced by this media-state interaction, the key limitation of our study is that we are left to speculate about the actual reasons behind the trajectory of *Komsomol'skaya Pravda's* framing. Two explanations seem plausible. First, this self-imposed censorship could have been driven by the newspaper's owners' and editors' need to escape the potentially punitive consequences of unwanted attention from the state. As we have demonstrated, the state's repertoire of disincentives to unfavorable coverage was wide. In this sense, the trajectory of *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* can be seen as a projection of the Kremlin's political power.

The second explanation interprets this self-imposed censorship as pragmatic and profit-oriented. *Komsomol'skaya Pravda's* status as a privately owned tabloid dependent on advertising in the volatile Russian media market makes it reasonable to expect that it was paying attention to its readership's tastes. With 92% of Russians relying on state-controlled television in 2011–2012 as their primary source of information ("Istochniki," 2017), the majority of *Komsomol'skaya Pravda's* readership was also likely exposed to, and influenced by, the negative portrayals of the protesters that dominated the TV coverage at that time (Parfitt, 2012; Popkova, 2014). In this sense, the turn in the newspaper's framing could be interpreted as a strategic marketing decision by the profit-oriented tabloid to avoid publishing incongruent information that might have led to the newspaper's losing readers.

Equally plausible, and not necessarily in contradiction with each other, these two motivations highlight the combined pressures of the Kremlin's political power and the market forces in the Russian media environment. Future research informed by the results of this study and built on ethnographic fieldwork in the newsroom of *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* or other such nonstate media outlets could provide further insights into the process of negotiating the limits of journalistic autonomy in this complicated authoritarian-capitalist media context. Regardless of the newspaper's exact reasoning, the observable outcome suggests that in the shifting—and apparently constricting—context of the Russian media today, the possibilities to remain apolitical are shrinking. As a result, the media seems to be increasingly drawn into the sphere of Putin's regime.

Finally, although this research centers on the communicative imprint of Putin's political power, it should be noted that the media do not represent the only institution that is used by the ruling elites in Russia and other nondemocratic post-Communist countries for consolidating their authoritarian power (Silitiski, 2009; Vanderhill, 2017; Way, 2005). In this sense, the constricting boundaries of acceptable criticism in the Russian commercial press can be best understood if viewed from a broader perspective, as following a more general logic of imposing censorship of ideological, cultural, and political diversity. Starting with streamlining more state-dependent and, therefore, less protected institutions, such as public schools (Levintova & Butterfield, 2010), cultural institutions (Kuzio, 2016; Vázquez-Liñán, 2017), and state-funded media (Dunn, 2014; Gehlbach, 2010; Lipman, 2005; Zassoursky, 2009), this reifying logic eventually spills over to those areas that ostensibly enjoy the legal protection from the government interference, such as the nonstate press, who find themselves contributing to, rather than resisting, further authoritarian consolidation.

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