



Global Partners or International Spies? A Comparative Analysis of the Russian Media's Coverage of the Law on “Foreign Agents”

ANNA POPKOVA
Western Michigan University, USA

This article analyzes how the four Russian media that cater to different Russian and global audiences—the newspaper *Izvestiya*, the satellite television channel Russia Today, the newspaper *Kommersant*, and the radio station Ekho Moskvyy—covered the debate around the controversial law on “foreign agents” passed in Russia in the summer of 2012. The law and the media coverage it received exposed the clash between Russia's desire for global integration and the type of nationalism that defines Russian national identity as incompatible with Western values. The findings demonstrate that, although different media offer different articulations of Russia's national identity, the dominant articulation constructs the identity of Russia around the idea of a strong state that determines and manages the conditions of Russia's global integration.

Keywords: Russia, globalization, nationalism, media, “foreign agents” law

Introduction

In the summer of 2012, Russian authorities proposed a law requiring all nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working in Russia and receiving foreign funds to publicly declare themselves “foreign agents”—a status that legalized increased government surveillance of these organizations' activities. Moreover, the Russian word for *agent* has a second meaning—*spy*. The combination of *foreign* and *agent* immediately evokes memories of Cold War–era espionage, potentially discrediting the work of NGOs in Russia.

The proposed law and the heated debates that unfolded around it exposed one of the main tensions in Russia's post–Cold War national identity reconstruction. Russia's desire for global integration and cooperation—exemplified by Russia's active pursuit of membership in BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), the G8, G20, and the World Trade Organization—clashed with the type of rising nationalism that defines Russian national identity as incompatible with Western political values. The foreign agents law controversy presents a compelling case study for an analysis of Russia's negotiation of its national identity in a globalizing world. Various NGOs and their activities have become instrumental to

Anna Popkova: anna.popkova@wmich.edu

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the process of globalization, at least as it is understood in the liberal democratic tradition that emphasizes the emergence and growth of the global civil society (Hanson, 2008; Kaldor, 2003). Thus, the way NGOs are received in and treated by various nation-states can indicate the extent to which these states consider integration into the process of globalization an important part of their national identity.

The proposed law received extensive coverage in the Russian media. It has been long argued by numerous scholars that media play a crucial role in shaping national identities (Anderson, 2006; Billig, 1995; Mihelj, 2011). As important sites of cultural and political production (Kellner, 2003), mass media construct social reality in ways that communicate to their audiences what norms and values they share as a nation, who are the insiders and the outsiders, and what is the place and role of that nation in a larger structure of global relations. Thus, as various Russian media covered the debate around the law on foreign agents, they inevitably engaged in mediation of Russia's national identity. This project aims to discover—through qualitative textual analysis of media texts—what articulations of Russia's national identity were produced by four different Russian media as they covered the passing of the law on foreign agents in the summer of 2012.

Gaining a deeper understanding of Russia's emerging national identity and its role and place in the contemporary world is particularly important given the current state of global politics. As Russia strives to present itself as an emerging power—through nation-branding efforts (Simons, 2011) and through its increasingly assertive and controversial foreign policy—the question of Russia's national identity in a globalizing world might have important economic, political, cultural, and security implications that extend beyond Russia's borders.

Globalization, Nationalism, and the Media

Much of the scholarly debate in the field of global communication in the decades following the Cold War centered on the question of whether globalization has been replacing nationalism as a central framework within which the world order and the relations of power underlying it are imagined and practiced. This study sides with the perspective that globalization and nationalism are not mutually exclusive but rather mutually constitutive frameworks. Although globalization certainly challenges many assumptions about culture, economy, and politics supported by the nation-state paradigm (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001; Price, 2002; Singh, 2002), the changes in power dynamics associated with these challenges should be interpreted not as a power shift but as an ongoing power struggle (Castells, 2007; Deibert, 1997). Moreover, some scholars argue that “globalization is characterized by the *intensification* of nationalism within nation-states, as nations struggle to impose order upon geopolitical forces beyond their locus of control” (Thomas & Antony, 2015, p. 494, italics in original).

Although there are multiple definitions of a nation-state (Croucher, 2004; Rourke, 1986), some of its core characteristics are sovereignty, defined territory, and a sense of common identity, an “imagined community” (Anderson, 2006) that connects the people belonging to a nation-state. These characteristics assume a certain degree of isolationism and a necessity to draw various borders (not only physical ones) to distinguish one nation from another. Thus, national identity under the nation-state paradigm is often defined through *juxtaposition* to other states/nations and through discourses of inclusion and exclusion

(Schlesinger, 1991). Such discourses are based on the oppositional metaphors of us versus them and on the narratives that emphasize the distinctions between insiders and outsiders (Billig, 1995; Cavallaro, 2001). These discourses bind people together, helping them make sense of who they are as a nation and defining their collective past, present, and future.

As critical sites of meaning making (Grossberg, Wartella, Whitney, & Wise, 2005), mass media play an important role in the process of nation building (Anderson, 2006; Billig, 1995) and in shaping and reshaping national identities (Kenix, 2015; Polonska-Kimunguyi & Kimunguyi, 2011; Şahin, 2011; Thomas & Antony, 2015), especially in the context of globalization (Parks & Kumar, 2002; Rantanen, 2002, 2005). Mass media construct national identities by *framing* various events and phenomena in ways that contextualize them in existing cultural narratives, mythologies (Bennett, 1996; Bennett & Lawrence, 1995), ideologies, and cultural values (Gamson, 1989; Gitlin, 1980). Framing involves “selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration” (Johnson-Cartee, 2004, p. 24) as media “declare the underlying causes and likely consequences of a problem and establish criteria for evaluating potential remedies of the problem” (Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997, pp. 567–568).

The narratives constructed by mass media as they frame various events reflect and shape the critical debates and discussions about how a nation’s past, present, and future can be imagined and, as a consequence, managed. These debates, and media’s indispensable role in mediating them, are particularly important for BRICS states. Having undergone significant economic, political, cultural, and social transformations in the past two decades—including the liberalization and privatization of media—BRICS states in general and Russia in particular actively seek global integration while trying to redefine their national identities and establish themselves as powerful actors on the global stage.

Russia’s Post-Soviet National Identity

Two decades of Russia’s post-Soviet transformation present a complex history of Russia’s attempts to integrate into the global community while trying to redefine its national identity. Central to this process has been the revived question of whether Russia is an organic part of the West and therefore should shape its national identity around the political traditions of liberal democratic states (Duncan, 2005; Tolz, 1998). An alternative view suggests that Russia should follow its own path in reconstructing its national identity (Duncan, 2005; Tolz, 1998). The former view was particularly prominent in the early 1990s. However, later in the decade, the latter perspective gained popularity, shaping and reflecting Russia’s foreign and domestic politics and shifting the discourse on Russia’s national identity.

The theme of Russia’s right to “decide for itself the pace, terms and conditions of moving towards democracy” (Tsygankov, 2006, p. 176) became highly prevalent in the early 2000s and influenced Russia’s official position on various global issues as well as Russia’s internal politics. This theme also influenced a turn in Russia’s politics that some scholars described as a “shift from democracy to managed democracy” (Lipman & McFaul, 2001, p. 116). This political direction emerged in part as a reaction to the perceived threats to Russia’s national identity and security. This reaction was also fueled by the growing discontent in Russian political consciousness with what was perceived as one of the consequences of

globalization: a Western liberal-capitalist experiment imposed on Russia in the 1990s. As Legvold (2011) noted,

at a deep, emotional level, for Russian leaders, elite, and, in this case, much of the public, . . . globalization has been viewed as the cruel author of winners and losers, and in this universe Russia is one of the losers. (p. 17)

Thus, as Rozanova (2003) points out, “the concept of national sovereignty has emerged . . . as a theoretical and policy alternative to the challenges of globalization” (p. 649). Such a concept of national sovereignty was complemented by a discourse of nationalism that increasingly defined Russia’s national identity as antagonistic to Western political values.

At the same time, Russia has been eager to continue integrating into the global economic system, as evidenced by its membership in BRICS, the G20, G8, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as well as its efforts to join the World Trade Organization. Russia has also taken direct steps toward improving its image worldwide, notably by launching a multilingual television station, Russia Today, in 2005 with the goal of “acquaint[ing] an international audience with the Russian viewpoint” (About RT, n.d.) by hiring a Washington, DC–based public relations firm, Ketchum Inc., in 2006 to present Russia globally in a favorable light and by launching several nation-branding campaigns (Simons, 2013).

The law on foreign agents was proposed and debated at a critical moment when debates about Russia’s national identity were marked by several competing, and at times diverging, perspectives. Thus, to account for the interplay between Russia’s desire for global integration on the one hand and its protection of sovereign national identity on the other, this project intentionally selected four media outlets that represent different sectors of the Russian media sphere, serving different segments of Russian and global populations.

Russia Today (RT) is a multilingual television channel that broadcasts globally through satellite and cable providers and through the YouTube channel. Russia Today was launched by the Russian government in 2005 to improve Russia’s image abroad and to offer an alternative (and, as RT claims, a Russian) viewpoint on global events. RT has a large broadcast audience reach of about 700 million people in more than 100 countries (About RT, n.d.). The analysis of RT’s coverage of the controversial law provides a perspective that reflects the official articulations of Russian national identity as they are being presented to audiences outside of Russia.

Izvestiya (The News) is a major national newspaper that supports the Russian government’s position on social and political issues. In 2012, *Izvestiya* had a daily reach of more than 400,000 readers, with about a third of those readers located in Moscow and St. Petersburg (Pressa, n.d.). *Izvestiya*’s coverage of the law provides a perspective that reflects the official articulations of Russian national identity in national/domestic context.¹

¹ Channel One—a Russian television channel that represents the government’s perspective on politics and has the widest reach and the largest audience in Russia—was considered for the analysis initially, but the

Ekho Moskvyy (Echo of Moscow)—a radio station—is one of the most prominent media outlets that provides space for political dissent and openly criticizes the government. In 2012, Ekho had a daily reach of 3 million people across Russia, and about 1 million people in Moscow (Radio, n.d.). Ekho Moskvyy offers alternative articulations of Russian national identity.

Kommersant (The Merchant)—one of the top business newspapers that aims to serve Russian businesspeople—is an important component in the context of Russia's efforts to be integrated into the global economic system. *Kommersant* had a daily reach of more than 300,000 people across Russia in 2012, with about a half of these readers located in Moscow and St. Petersburg (Pressa, n.d.).

This project analyzes how these four media covered the passing of the law on foreign agents, seeking to answer the following key questions: What were the dominant themes in the coverage by each media outlet? What were the similarities and differences among the identified themes? How did the similarities and differences in the ways different media framed the coverage work to construct Russia's national identity?

Method

The research questions posed by this study call for an interpretive, exploratory analysis. Therefore, this study is based on a qualitative textual analysis of the media texts produced by four Russian media from June 28, 2012—the date when the bill was proposed—to July 21, 2012—when the bill was signed by President Putin.

All texts were obtained from online archives using different combinations of the keywords *NGO*, *law*, and *foreign agents* (for *Izvestiya*, Ekho Moskvyy, and *Kommersant*, in Russian; for Russia Today, in English). The search resulted in 31 news reports and four editorials retrieved from *Izvestiya*, 41 news reports and four editorials from *Kommersant*, 27 news reports and 19 talk shows from Ekho Moskvyy, and 15 broadcast news reports and 5 online news articles from Russia Today.

For *Izvestiya* and *Kommersant*, both news stories and the editorials were analyzed; the distinction is explained later in the analysis. The average length of *Izvestiya's* news reports and editorials was 382 and 893 words, respectively. For *Kommersant*, the average length of a news report and an editorial was 317 and 865 words, respectively. The transcripts of Ekho Moskvyy's news stories and talk shows were analyzed, and the distinction is explained later in the findings section. The average length of a news report transcript was 159 words, and the average length of a talk show transcript was 1,894 words. Russia today is a satellite television channel, but it has a prominent online presence, and, thus, in addition to the transcripts of video clips that comprise parts of RT's broadcast news coverage, online news articles were also included in the analysis. The average length of a broadcast news transcript and an online news article was 312 and 603 words, respectively. All materials retrieved from RT were in English. The quotes from the other three media were translated from Russian by the author.

author was unable to access the necessary materials at the time when the study was conducted. *Izvestia* was chosen as a close ideological proxy.

Although media studies based on content analysis rarely mix formats, this project's emphasis on ideological analysis required combining newspaper, television, and radio coverage. RT is the only Russian media outlet that not only broadcasts internationally but has very specific nation-branding and public diplomacy objectives, making its inclusion in this study particularly important. Similarly, radio station Ekho Moskvyy is the most prominent alternative media outlet that gives voice and space to oppositional and dissenting views that are excluded from most institutional Russian media. Moreover, the mix of media corresponds to the reality in which media convergence defines media consumption, with audiences easily and naturally navigating among different media in search of information and news.

The texts were read closely using a qualitative textual analysis based on the grounded theory approach (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In the initial stage of open coding, 10 categories were identified in the coverage by *Izvestiya*, 8 in the coverage by RT, 12 in *Kommersant*, and 10 in Ekho Moskvyy. The categories were integrated during axial coding—a stage in which “the codes are used to make connections between categories . . . [resulting] in the creation of either new categories or a theme that spans many categories” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 220). The categories were then “collapsed” into “notional categories” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) or final themes: four in *Izvestiya*, three in RT, five in *Kommersant*, and five in Ekho Moskvyy. To answer the second question, the themes were compared across four media during the stage of axial coding, relying on the key principles of grounded theory that are based on constant reflexive comparison across sources and themes.

The Law on Foreign Agents

On June 28, 2012, a group of deputies from the Russian State Duma (Parliament) proposed legislative amendments to the existing law that regulates the activities of NGOs working in Russia but receiving foreign funding. The bill proposed renaming these NGOs “foreign agents” and mentioning this status in all publicity materials and media reports. The bill also proposed monitoring these NGOs' activities more frequently and with greater scrutiny. NGOs that failed or refused to register as foreign agents would face significant fines of up to 3 million rubles (more than \$100,000 in 2012), registration suspension, license revocation, and a prison term of up to three years for these NGOs' leaders/members.

Proponents and authors of the bill argued that the law was not designed to obstruct the work of NGOs. Instead, it aimed to achieve “full disclosure of [NGOs'] functions to Russian citizens” (“Parliament to Label,” 2012). The authors emphasized that the idea was borrowed from several Western European countries and the United States, where similar laws regulating the work of externally funded NGOs exist.

The bill's critics argued that the proposed law targeted specific organizations whose activities centered on monitoring elections and political campaigns. Thus, the law represented yet another link in a chain of events aimed at curbing political dissent in Russia following the postelection protests in the winter of 2012. Opponents of the bill objected to the term *foreign agent*, which in Russian linguistic, cultural, and historical context means first and foremost *spy*. Such interpretation, argued the opponents, could contribute to the development of negative attitudes among the general public toward the NGOs and their activities. The opponents also disputed the ambiguous definition of the term *political activity* in the bill's

draft. This lack of clarity could lead to loose interpretation of the law, providing opportunities for targeting only NGOs not loyal to the regime.

Despite much controversy that surrounded the bill as well as heated debates both within and outside the State Duma, the bill passed on July 21, 2012—only three weeks after it was initially proposed.

Findings

This section presents and discusses the themes identified in the coverage by *Izvestiya* (four themes), *Russia Today* (three themes), *Kommersant* (five themes), and *Ekho Moskvy* (five themes). The section discusses and explains the details of how these four media framed the debate around the proposed law. Primary sources cited in this section are listed in the Appendix, with full documentation of sources provided in the References.

Izvestiya's Coverage

A real crackdown. *Izvestiya's* coverage overwhelmingly focused on the law's intention to "finally crack down" on the NGOs funded from abroad. The choice of words and terms in the coverage created an impression that the NGOs were already guilty of breaking the law and that their foreign funding was, if not illegal, then surely suspicious. For example, *Izvestiya* constantly referred to putting the NGOs into a "special register," subjecting them to "special audit procedures" (June 28, July 5a), and possibly imprisoning the violators. Such references implied that violating the proposed law constituted a crime rather than an administrative offence.

Izvestiya also cited several defenders of the bill emphasizing that the law would "show who is who" (June 29b), exposing the "real intentions of the NGOs," and "finally disguising whose interests these NGOs represent" (July 3a, July 3b, July 6c). In Russian, these expressions convey a strong sense of treason and deception.

Foreign influence. *Izvestiya* emphasized, mostly through the use of direct quotes, that Russia needed to "protect its sovereignty" (June 28) and its "national and state interests" (July 6c) from "foreign influence," referring to the law as a "soft form of defense" (July 3c). Several articles stressed that NGOs' foreign funding likely meant that they "worked in the interests of foreign governments" (July 3a, July 3b, July 6d), aiming to "destabilize the political situation in Russia" (June 29b). For example, *Izvestiya* quoted one of the bill's authors stating that "[Russia] doesn't need 'Trojan horses'; we must give things their real names" (July 10b).

U.S. law model. Ironically, arguments about the "dangerous Western influence" overlapped in *Izvestiya's* coverage with references to the bill "closely resembling the law on foreign agents in the US" (June 28). Authors argued that the U.S. law "actively functioned" (June 29b), and "NGOs that receive foreign funding must indicate this on their business cards" (July 6d). When comparing the proposed law to its foreign analogues, deputies quoted in *Izvestiya* frequently emphasized that the Russian law "is much softer" (July 6d) and is "very liberal" (July 18). The presentation of the U.S. law model theme was

primarily defensive, as the arguments about “similar foreign laws” always followed the arguments of the opponents of the Russian law. At the same time, *Izvestiya* did not explain which foreign laws the bill’s supporters referenced. One article that covered a discussion of the bill in the State Duma quoted a deputy naming the law—a 1938 Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA)—yet without elaboration on its history or details (July 3b).

Voice of the opposition. *Izvestiya* quoted members of Obshestvennaya Palata (Civic Chamber) who were “outraged” by the bill, calling it “idiotic” (June 29a). *Izvestiya* also mentioned that the head of the president’s Council on Human Rights opposed the law as unconstitutional and made several attempts to discuss with the president the possibility of at least delaying the process (June 29a, July 5b), though unsuccessfully. *Izvestiya* quoted the confused members of some NGOs who insisted that the current law regulating the work of NGOs in Russia already had all necessary provisions in place (June 28, June 29a, July 3a).

Izvestiya mentioned the concerns of the law’s opponents with the term *foreign agent* being a synonym of *spy* (July 4) and “sounding rough for a Russian ear” (July 3a). However, *Izvestiya* did not focus extensively on this issue. Instead, *Izvestiya* put heavier emphasis on the concern of the law’s opponents with the ambiguity of the term *political activity* (June 29a, July 3b, July 4, July 5b, July 10b) and on the procedural violations that Obshestvennaya Palata found in bill’s design (July 4, July 6a, July 6b, July 10a, July 10b). *Izvestiya*’s overwhelming focus on these two issues conveyed an impression that these were the opposition’s main points of concern. Such framing of the opposition’s objections to the law shifted the focus of the coverage from for and against the law to what should be improved in the bill, thus legitimizing the potential law. Additionally, this approach allowed including the opposition’s arguments in the articles, giving an impression of balanced coverage.

Russia Today’s Coverage

RT’s coverage of the bill mirrored *Izvestiya*’s. Even the key quotes were identical, only translated to English. There were, however, several unique aspects of RT’s coverage.

Informing citizens, increasing transparency. RT emphasized that the law’s purpose was to “give more information to the Russian citizens” (July 18), which “requires more transparency from [NGOs]” (July 13b). RT stressed that the bill was a “guarantee of openness,” since it required NGOs to “fully inform Russian citizens about [NGOs’] foreign supporters and thus about their real motivations” (July 6). As one of the bill’s authors stated, “when Russian citizens see how many agents are working in their country, they will become more active in developing a civil society on the basis of national sovereignty and the domestic interests of the Russian Federation” (June 29).

RT’s emphasis on transparency, openness, and the development of civil society suggests that RT tailored its coverage to the global (and especially Western) audience, insisting that the law was an important and necessary element of Russia’s “democratic transition.”

International experience. RT frequently mentioned that the bill's authors relied on the international experience (July 5, July 6) and that similar laws existed in such "leading democratic countries" (July 6) as the United States, France, and Israel (June 29, July 18). RT also emphasized that "the bill used similar US legislation as a 'blueprint'" (July 6) and that the "term 'foreign agents' was borrowed from the United States" (July 5). Moreover, RT emphasized that "much stricter rules apply to the NGOs that work in the United States" (July 2). RT did not explain in its coverage which U.S. law was used as a "blueprint." Only one article mentioned that "such a law has been in force in the US since 1938" (July 5).

Voice of the opposition. In several reports, RT mentioned that "the initiative has already drawn criticism from Human Rights activists and officials as well as from several opposition parties" (July 6, July 13, July 24). RT acknowledged that many members of the NGOs "rejected the claims that [they] worked on behalf of 'agents of foreign states'" (July 2). RT quoted activists who insisted that "the true goal of this bill is to discredit and effectively ruin major civic organizations independent of the authorities in [Russia]" (July 5) and who argued that the law would "split society, hurting the drive towards democracy" (July 13a, July 18, July 24). Additionally, RT cited the deputies of the opposition party Fair Russia calling the bill "repressive" (July 5), "propagandistic . . . and aimed at undermining citizens' trust towards non-profit organizations" (July 19).

RT mentioned the concerns about the *foreign agents* label. However, it did not explain the linguistic, cultural, and historical meaning of the term, making it difficult for a non-Russian audience to understand the crucial political implications.

Although RT, like *Izvestiya*, provided a space for arguments supporting and opposing the bill, thus creating an impression of balanced coverage, it also stayed within the safe boundaries of criticism, much like *Izvestiya*. This point, however, is best understood when comparing RT's and *Izvestiya*'s coverage to the coverage by *Kommersant* and *Ekho Moskvy*.

Kommersant's Coverage

A real crackdown? Similar to *Izvestiya*, *Kommersant* emphasized that the law would "tighten the screws" on the activities of "foreign agents," possibly "stopping their work and imposing significant fines," and even imprisoning "repeat offenders" for up to four years (June 29, June 30, July 2, July 3). However, in contrast to *Izvestiya*'s linguistic choices that criminalized and marginalized the NGOs, *Kommersant* used words and expressions that victimized the NGOs.

Political context. Referencing the law's opponents, *Kommersant* argued that "the topic [was] tied to the pre-Presidential election protests in Moscow" (June 29) and that the "passing of this bill . . . happens along with other measures that limit the development of civil society in Russia" (July 10a). *Kommersant* also suggested, mainly through direct quotes, that "people in certain circles feel threatened by the NGOs because they are afraid of the 'revolution sponsored from abroad'" (July 10a). Building on this idea, *Kommersant* highlighted some of the parallels with the Soviet era: "Any activity that concerns human rights is tied to the criticism of authorities, so this law puts everyone in danger. If it passes, it will

be very similar to the famous proposition on anti-Soviet propaganda" (June 30, quoting a law's opponent). Arguing that the "Western threat" is no more than a case of paranoia, *Kommersant* suggested that "Deputy Sidyakin (the bill's author) is at war with America in his imagination" (July 6a). At the same time, *Kommersant* referred to the public opinion poll that indicated that more than 60% of Russians supported the bill (July 18). *Kommersant* offered a commentary by a sociologist:

Most people don't understand the real problem and base their opinion on general ideological assumptions. In general, [people] dislike the West. This is the so-called "conservative majority" . . . they support strengthening the role of the state and have an 'instinctive negative reaction' to foreign agents. (July 18)

Indeed, *Kommersant* emphasized that the law was designed to protect and support national interests. As one of the law's defenders argued, "the goal is to protect Russia: 'We must work hard to strengthen our state'" (July 18).

By providing these details, *Kommersant* emphasized that the law was part of the political strategy of bolstering the nation-state by crumbling dissent rather than an attempt to increase transparency or to follow international standards.

International experience: clarification and critique. Just like *Izvestiya* and RT, *Kommersant* frequently referred to the "international experience" that was "used as a blueprint" for the bill. However, early in the coverage (June 28), *Kommersant* explained that the bill's authors referenced the Foreign Agents Registration Act, a U.S. law that was introduced in 1938 to counteract German Nazi propaganda (June 29). Later, *Kommersant* stated that "authors of the bill are convinced that they fine-tuned national laws on NGOs to match international standards; [however] experts do not find any equivalents abroad" (July 3). One of the main opponents of the law—the head of the president's Council on Human Rights, Mikhail Fedotov—told *Kommersant* that "there is no [such law] anywhere in Europe, and in the United States it caused McCarthyism to thrive" (July 4a).

Kommersant also presented the opinions of foreign actors. It quoted Catherine Ashton—the high representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy for the European Union—stating that "this bill cannot be compared to the existing laws and practices in the EU or the US" (July 10a). *Kommersant* also referred to Patrick Ventrell—a spokesperson for the U.S. Department of State—stating that "Russian Federation uses a 'different standard' than the United States, and this is what worries America" (July 13b). Additionally, *Kommersant* published an interview with a U.S. professor of political science (working at the Russian School of Economics) discussing the similarities and differences between FARA and the Russian law on foreign agents (July 14a). The interview illustrated how the fine details that get lost in translation when comparing judicial systems cross-nationally can be used strategically to advance specific national political goals.

Voice of the opposition. *Kommersant* extensively discussed the ambiguity of the term *political activity*—a concern shared by members of various NGOs (June 29, July 3, July 14b), the head of the

president's Council on Human Rights (July 4a, July 10b), and the law experts who insisted that the proposed law was "unconstitutional" (July 6b).

Kommersant also brought up the concerns of foreign NGOs who issued an official letter stating that "passing of this law will be a violation of Russia's international commitments . . . in particular, the citizens' rights for freedom of assembly and expression" (July 7).

Additionally, *Kommersant* pointed out that the economic conditions of globalization, whereby the vast majority of financial exchanges transcends national borders, can make almost any organization a foreign agent (July 6a, July 13a), thus raising an important question of whether it is possible for a state to be integrated in the global system economically yet remain independent and even isolated politically.

Foreign agent—a problematic term. *Kommersant* frequently quoted various people uniformly admitting that the only synonym of the term *foreign agent* in Russian is *spy* (July 4b). They insisted that the term had a "negative connotation" (July 6b) and "remind[ed] of the Stalin era" (July 7). *Kommersant* quoted a leader of the parliamentary opposition saying that "the term does not have the same meaning in English. Naming someone a 'foreign agent' [in Russia] is a disgrace [to them]" (July 2).

Ekho Moskvyy's Coverage

Ekho Moskvyy (Ekho) heavily criticized the bill. Implicitly in the news reports and much more explicitly in the talk shows, Ekho framed the law as repressive and actively challenged the arguments of the bill's defenders.

Repressive law. Similar to the three other media outlets, Ekho focused on the key propositions of the law: putting NGOs in a special register, subjecting them to special checks, penalizing them with large fines, and imprisoning "repeat offenders." Unlike *Izvestiya* and RT, and similar to *Kommersant* (though more eloquently, especially in the talk shows), Ekho framed the law as repressive. Even in the news reports, which, in comparison to the talk shows, presented neutral, fact-based coverage, Ekho frequently used metaphors that in Russian language refer to repressive measures, such as "tightening the screws" (June 29a), "blocking the oxygen" (June 29c), and "political cleansing" (June 29a). In the talk shows, the hosts and the guests who opposed the law referred to it as "completely political, completely repressive" (July 8), aimed at "bullying the NGOs" (July 10b), "ghettoizing" them (July 7), and "limiting, not expanding, citizens' rights" (July 8).

Intentional ambiguity. Similar to the other media, Ekho mentioned the argument regarding the ambiguity of the term *political activity*. However, unlike the other media, Ekho insisted that the ambiguity was intentional to leave room for interpretation and "selective punishment" (July 7). Ekho's chief editor, Alexey Venediktov, argued in a talk show: "This law is badly written. It's written badly on purpose, to separate the 'bad guys' from the 'good guys'" (July 8).

International experience: critique and clarification. Ekho challenged the argument about the law being based on the U.S. law model. One commentator stated:

Experts already explained that this was a law from 1938. It was introduced in specific historical circumstances when Nazi Germany was on the rise and Hitler flooded the world with his propaganda and agents. Since then this law is de facto not active, plus it has completely different criteria. . . . So all this propaganda that we took the progressive Western experience is, again, a hundred percent lie. (July 7)

Others also critiqued references to U.S. law as “complete nonsense” (July 8), stating that elements of the U.S. law were “taken out of context” (June 29b). A talk show guest noted: “The analogy is completely inappropriate . . . I am concerned that elements of other political systems are taken out of their political contexts and hammered into the Russian system” (July 20).

Foreign agent—problem with the term. Ekho Moskvyy insisted that the use of the term *foreign agents* was strategic and propagandistic. In talk shows, the hosts and the guests uniformly agreed that the term was “offensive for the ear” (July 5, July 10b) and, given the Russian “mentality and political tradition,” could only be interpreted as a spy (June 29b, July 6b, July 7, July 10b).

In the talk shows, Ekho suggested that the term is strategically chosen to manipulate public opinion: “In minds of the general public, all these NGOs, especially those that deal with human rights, will be considered spies” (June 29b).

Political context. Ekho emphasized that the law was just another link in a chain of events reflecting “the government’s strengthening of its position” (July 7). Ekho’s journalists connected these events to the fear the Russian government sensed after its legitimacy was challenged by the postparliamentary and prepresidential election protests in the winter of 2011–2012 (July 6a): “I think that we have a reactionary model now, and the new authorities . . . are moving toward serious repressions. They got scared of [the events in] December–February, and are moving now, legislatively, toward ‘tightening the screws’” (July 8). Journalists also suggested that “authorities, especially the current ones, have hated the NGOs for a long time . . . because NGOs exposed their failures” (July 7).

Discussion and Conclusion

The law on foreign agents and the debate that unfolded around it exposed one of the main tensions in Russia’s post-Soviet national identity reconstruction. Russia’s desire for global integration clashed with the rising nationalism that defines Russian national identity as incompatible with Western political values. Since media play an important role in the construction of national identities, this project analyzes how the Russian media framed the debate about the foreign agents law to construct Russia’s national identity. The findings demonstrate that different media framed the debate differently, thus offering different models of Russia’s national identity.

Izvestiya’s coverage marginalized and even criminalized the NGOs. The language used in the news reports and especially in the editorials conveyed a sense that the NGOs working in Russia could indeed be spies of foreign governments and the law would help expose this. Such framing worked to construct Russia’s national identity around the idea of Russia being the victim of foreign conspiracy and

thus having no choice but to defend itself to remain strong. This model of national identity aligns with the official narrative on the consequences of globalization for Russia articulated by Legvold (2011) and discussed earlier in this article. This narrative suggests that Russia opened itself up for the world too recklessly and, as a result, ended up losing its power and influence. Thus, the model of the new Russian national identity articulated by *Izvestiya* through its coverage of the foreign agents law debate is based on the idea of a strong and powerful state determining the extent and managing the pace of Russia's global integration.

Russia Today framed the coverage similarly to *Izvestiya*, yet it also emphasized the ideas of transparency, accountability, democracy, and civil society. Such framing of the issue suggests that RT constructed Russia's national identity by building on the narratives of sovereign democracy and "selective global engagement." RT's coverage aligned closely with the policy narrative of Russia's right to "decide for itself the pace, terms and conditions of moving toward democracy" (Tsygankov, 2006, p. 176).

Kommersant and Ekho Moskvly mostly critiqued the proposed law, framing it as repressive and indicative of Russia's growing isolation. If *Izvestiya* suggested that Russia was a victim of foreign conspiracy, *Kommersant's* and Ekho's coverage implied that Russia was a victim of inadequate domestic politics and populist anti-Western rhetoric. *Kommersant* and Ekho critiqued the models of Russia's national identity offered by *Izvestiya* and RT. Their critical coverage implied that an alternative, and better, model of Russia's national identity would involve little to no state interference in Russia's economic, political, and cultural integration into the globalization process.

The range of perspectives on the foreign agents law presented by different Russian media suggests that the Russian media sphere is by no means uniform. This finding reminds us that the Russian neoauthoritarian media system (Becker, 2004) is not as homogeneous and monolithic as it may often seem to non-Russian audiences and observers. Instead, it is marked by discursive complexity, where alternative interpretations of national identity constantly challenge the dominant narratives. This finding is also consistent with the arguments about the ideological diversity of the Russian media sphere made by other scholars (Becker, 2004; Toepfl, 2014).

An important caveat, however, is that the four media analyzed in this project have different reach. Specifically, *Kommersant* and Ekho Moskvly have smaller audiences, which brings up the question of how much power these media and their articulations of Russia's national identity wield in Russian society. Although *Izvestiya* does not have a particularly large audience, its editorial stance aligns with the dominant, state-supported articulations of Russian national identity. The same state-supported and state-enforced narratives are shared by most other media in Russia, including the state-supported television, which has the widest reach and the largest audience in Russia ("Rossiya tonet," 2014; Toepfl, 2014).

The question of reach and audience size makes the case of Russia Today and its articulation of Russia's national identity particularly interesting. As a media outlet designed to be one of the key vehicles of Russia's public diplomacy and nation-branding efforts, RT tailors the official, state-supported model of Russia's national identity to various international audiences. Given RT's large reach and its growing

popularity worldwide (O'Sullivan, 2014), will the model of Russia's national identity articulated by RT leverage enough support to present a viable alternative to what is considered the hegemony of the West?

One could argue that, in the years following the passing of the controversial law on foreign agents, Russia has taken much more assertive steps toward formulating such an alternative by, for example, developing and promoting the brand of "Russian conservatism," which, interestingly, increasingly resonates with certain American and European conservative elites (Kohler, 2014; Whitmore, 2013). This nation-branding trend, combined with Russia's most recent actions internationally (notably in Ukraine and Crimea), suggests that Russia, while seeking to strengthen the state by insulating the domestic public sphere, also desires to bolster its power and influence internationally. At the same time, given the most recent economic sanctions imposed on Russia and its expulsion from the G8, will Russia be able to sustain its status of an emerging power? How might the fact that other BRICS nations backed Russia's actions in Crimea (Keck, 2014) (though with different degrees of enthusiasm) and refused to support the imposition of economic sanctions on Russia (York, 2014) complicate the dynamic of power relations in the world? Will Russia's aggressive foreign and oppressive domestic politics result in its complete isolation, or will the world witness the emergence of new alliances consolidated around the alternative paradigms of globalization?

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Zhermeleva, O. (2012b, July 10). Deputaty opredelilis's tonkostyami zakona ob NKO [Deputies finalized the details of the law on NGOs]. *Izvestiya*. Retrieved from <http://izvestia.ru/news/529993#ixzz2QbKj6zPR>

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Appendix: Primary Sources

Date	Author(s) or short title(s) as listed in references
<i>Izvestiya</i>	
June 28	Galimova, Zhermeleva, and Tropkina (2012)
June 29a	Novikova (2012a)
June 29b	Runkevich (2012c)
July 3a	Runkevich (2012a)
July 3b	Zhermeleva (2012c)
July 4	Novikova and Tropkina (2012)
July 5a	Runkevich (2012b)
July 5b	Sidibe (2012)
July 6a	Subbotina (2012a)
July 6b	Subbotina (2012b)
July 6c	Zhermeleva (2012d)
July 6d	Zhermeleva (2012a)
July 10a	Novikova (2012b)
July 10b	Zhermeleva (2012b)
July 18	Tsoi and Subbotina (2012)
<i>Russia Today</i>	
June 29	Parliament to label (2012)
July 2	Russian rights (2012)
July 5	LibDems (2012)
July 6	Lower House approves (2012)
July 12	HR Council wants (2012)
July 13a	HR groups blast (2012)

July 13b	Lower House gives (2012)
July 18	Upper House approves (2012)
July 19	"Foreign agents" bill (2012)
July 24	Putin signs (2012)
<i>Kommersant</i>	
June 29	Nekommercheskim (2012)
June 30	Andrianov and Tumanov (2012)
July 2	Esery nemeremy (2012)
July 3	Khamraev, Nagornyh, Bekbylatova, Samokhina, and Gorodetskaya (2012)
July 4a	Gorodetskaya (2012)
July 4b	Khamraev (2012a)
July 6a	Ambinder and Panyushkin (2012)
July 6b	Ivanov and Goryashko (2012)
July 7	Chernyh (2012)
July 10a	ES obespokoen (2012)
July 10b	Goryashko (2012)
July 13a	Granik (2012)
July 13b	Tarasenko (2012)P.
July 14a	Khamraev (2012b)
July 14b	Korchenkova, Kozlova, and Borisov (2012)
July 18	Ivanov (2012)
<i>Ekho Moskv</i>	
June 29a	Gosudarstvennaya Duma (2012)
June 29b	Svanidze and Larina (2012)
June 29c	Zakonoproekt (2012)
July 5	Shevchenko and Koroleva (2012)
July 6a	Saprykin and Bychkova (2012)
July 6b	Utkin and Orekh (2012)
July 7	Dymarskiy and Ryzhkov (2012)
July 8	Venediktov (2012)
July 10a	Barshevskiy and Plyushev (2012)
July 10b	Kto boitsya NKO (2012)
July 20	Zlobin and Larina (2012)
