

## Agenda-Setting in Russian Media

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This article examines agenda-setting theory. I compare the results of Levada Center surveys on the most memorable issues of the month with the number of publications on those issues in the Russian press from 2014 to 2016. In total, 884 issues are analyzed in the article. The results of the study confirm the impact of discussions in the media on people's attention to an issue. The results also show that the discussions in the media one week before the date of polling are more important than the issues covered over the entire month. People better remember those issues that took place shortly before the polling, as well as those issues with intensifying discussions during the period. It is also important to note the role of regional publications in the sensitization of the public to various issues. Issues covered by national newspapers and news agencies but ignored by the regional press are significantly less remembered by the population.

*Keywords: agenda-setting, public opinion, Russia, media, press*

In the satirical book *Scoop* by Evelyn Waugh, a journalist says to his colleague—who is being sent as a special correspondent to “Ishmaelia” to report on the civil war there—that the editor-in-chief needs reports on the patriot victories. In general, the description of the situation in terms of the struggle between “patriots” and “traitors” is not surprising: News is often ideologically colored. However, it is disturbing that warring parties have different opinions about who is who in the conflict. Still, for a good reporter, this is not a problem; instead, it creates room to maneuver, as under these circumstances, any party that wins a victory can be referred to as the party of patriots. It is no longer important that, in reality, there is no civil war in the country and that the imaginary rebel camp is located in a place that is never visited, even by local people. And it is even less important that, until recently, hardly anyone knew of the existence of Ishmaelia. The pipeline is running, and the whole world is following the news.

Of course, the description offered by Evelyn Waugh is a little exaggerated. However, the ability of the media to construct problems (Blumer, 1971; Spector & Kitsuse, 1987) should not go unnoticed. The facts that are on the news are perceived as important; they are discussed and remembered. Those events that are neglected by the media are real only for the immediate participants and will soon be forgotten. The

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advocacy potential of the media—and the media’s ability to influence public opinion— may be debated at length. It can even be proven that the media do not have enough power to make people radically change their points of view (Hall, 1980; Valenzuela & Chernov, 2016). However, the idea that the media “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its (audience) what to think about” (Cohen, 2015, p. 3) does not arouse much distrust among researchers.

Our knowledge of most of the events taking place in the world is mediated by channels of mass communication. Accordingly, we would not have the opportunity to obtain information reflecting the many sides of reality if we did not have access to the media. To perceive an event as meaningful, people must, at least, be aware of what happened. We assume that there is a correlation between people’s perceptions of the importance of certain events and the intensity of the discussion of those events in the media. The purpose of the study is to test this hypothesis.

The Russian media system has several specific features that distinguish it from those in Western democracies. The specificity of the culture and the legacy of the Soviet Union form nondemocratic mass political media systems (Becker, 2004; Carlson, 2007). The state and Russian President Vladimir Putin personally are also often regarded as reasons explaining restrictions on freedom of speech in Russia (Gehlbach, 2010). Features of the Russian media system are associated with government financial and political control of media owners (Pallin, 2017; Skillen, 2017) and journalists’ self-censorship (Schimpfossel & Yablokov, 2014). As a result, a significant number of traditional media broadcasts mostly content that is convenient for the state and silences some unwanted questions. This trend is particularly noticeable in the case of television, but print media and especially the Internet remain more independent, although control over them increases with time (Pallin, 2017). Peculiarities of the national media system lead to high representation in the news of two types of strategic narratives: “anti-Western” or “anti-American” messages and reports on state-funded “mega-projects” such as the Sochi Winter Olympics (Szostek, 2017). Thus, the state constructs importance of certain issues and ways of interpreting them, which can affect people’s behavior (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013).

According to agenda-setting theory, the maximum correlation between discussions in the media and public opinion can be achieved in totalitarian states, where freedom of the media is virtually nonexistent (McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 2014). From this point of view, the limited independence of the Russian media (Fredheim, 2017; Gehlbach, 2010) should promote greater overlap of public and individual agendas. The study of the agenda-setting effect in Russia is therefore relevant.

### **Agenda-Setting Theory**

Agenda-setting theory, according to which the intensity of discussions in the media influences people’s perceptions of the importance of certain events, emerged a long time ago and has gained considerable popularity among researchers of mass communication (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs, 2014). This concept was first formulated on the basis of data from the presidential election campaign in the United States in 1968, when researchers revealed a correlation between the public’s perceptions of the most significant issues on the candidates’ agendas and the frequency with which those issues were mentioned in the media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The idea has been further confirmed by numerous and varied empirical

examples: the Gulf War (Iyengar & Simon, 1993), the Watergate scandal (Weaver, McCombs, & Spellman, 1975), and environmental pollution (Ader, 1995), among others.

However, agenda-setting hypotheses have not only been tested on a variety of empirical objects, they have also been modified (McCombs et al., 2014). Thus, as a complement to the idea of the impact of discussions in the media on perceptions of the importance of issues, the suggestion has been made to determine how the emphasis on certain characteristics of a situation or a public figure would shape public opinion. This development of the theory was called second-level agenda-setting (Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004). Later, the network agenda-setting model was also developed, allowing the possibility to "bundle" different agendas (Cheng & Chan, 2015; Guo et al., 2015; Guo & Vargo, 2015; Vu, Guo, & McCombs, 2014). At this stage, the attention of researchers is not focused on certain individual issues (information on which is considered to be independent), but rather on their interconnections. Thus, agenda-setting theory evolved, its tools became more complicated, and researchers began to focus on a variety of new objects.

The change in the media landscape, including the increasing role of the Internet (Johnson, 2013), contributed to the transformation of agenda-setting theory. On the one hand, vertical media (McCombs, 2014) have lost their monopoly on agenda-building, which can now be a "bottom-up" process when public attention to certain issues on the Internet stimulates discussion of these issues in the traditional media (Kim & Lee, 2006). Numerous studies have shown that journalists use information from social networks and blogs in the preparation of their materials (Parmelee, 2014; Verweij, 2012). In fact, one person's statement on the Internet may serve as the basis for agenda-setting.

However, this does not mean that classical agenda-setting theory is no longer applicable to the analysis of what shapes public opinion. In Russia, for example, Internet penetration is still relatively low. According to the Public Opinion Foundation, in Spring 2016, only 59% of the Russian population accessed the Internet daily ("Internet in Russia," 2016). Public opinion polls also show that vertical media remain the primary source of information for most Russians ("The Credibility of the Media," 2016). In addition, much communication on social media focuses on the author's personal hobbies and affairs rather than on various public processes and events (McCombs et al., 2014), which limits the impact of social networks and blogs on the public agenda. It is thus premature to proclaim the death of traditional media. Studies of the situation in Russia also have shown that network agendas are similar in different types of media (Kazun & Kazun, 2019). However, the tone of coverage of individual issues may be different (Kazun, 2019). Perhaps this is due to the greater independence of online media compared with television and the press.

Empirical studies of agenda-setting have presented researchers with the following conclusion: The impact of the media on people's perceptions of the importance of an issue is not always the same. Moreover, that impact is not always significant. It has become necessary to find the factors that explain the agenda-setting effect. Authors have pointed to the role of interpersonal communication (Wanta & Wu, 1992) in the emergence of the effect of agenda-setting. It was also noted that the impact of the media was greater in the case of "specific" issues, such as drug abuse, compared with abstract issues (federal deficit), which were difficult for people to understand and could not be visualized (Yagade & Dozier, 1990).

Researchers have noted that although, with regard to some issues, the media are the public's only source of information, for other events, personal experience is the dominant information source (Demers, Craff, Choi, & Pessin, 1989; McCombs, Graber, & Weaver, 1981). The latter set of events has been identified by researchers as "obtrusive." With regard to such issues, the influence of discussions in the media on people's perceptions of the importance of an event is negligible. An attempt to assess the agenda-setting effect in the case of regional and national issues in U.S. cities can be considered one of the most striking studies to test the obsession hypothesis (Palmgreen & Clarke, 1977). The study showed that discussion in the media had a lower impact on people's perceptions of regional problems, as people's assessments of events in their own cities were shaped primarily by interpersonal communication and personal experience of certain difficulties. The public agenda is the result of discussions in the media refracted by a personal experience perspective (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). For example, public opinion on such an "unobtrusive" issue as Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization largely repeated the rhetoric of the media. However, the population also expressed fears that were in direct contradiction to what was written in the newspapers, based on the negative experience of the economic reforms of the 1990s (Kazun, 2014).

Nevertheless, the idea of the importance of personal experience is not the only explanation for the fact that, in some cases, the influence of the media on public opinion was minimal. For example, attempts to answer this question have led to the concept of "need for orientation," which is, in fact, an attempt to take into account the relevance of the issue and some of the uncertainty associated with it. In a very general sense, the idea behind this approach is that the media cannot make a person think of an issue as important if the issue is not personally relevant to them (Valenzuela & Chernov, 2016). If the problem is not of interest to the individual, he/she can ignore numerous attempts of the media to establish its relevance.

According to the first studies of the need for orientation, all issues can be divided into four groups: high relevance and uncertainty, high relevance and low certainty, low relevance and high uncertainty, and low relevance and uncertainty<sup>2</sup> (Weaver, 1980). In the first case, there should be a high need for orientation, and in the second and third cases, the indicator is moderate; in the latter case, it is low. However, studies have shown that groups with a moderate need for orientation are not the same, and they behave in relation to information in different ways (Camaj, 2014).

Studies have shown that the need for orientation affects people's choice of an information channel. For example, the high value of this indicator means that people will turn to the news to obtain information on an issue that is relevant but unclear to them (Matthes, 2008), and they are more likely to prefer traditional media (print media, television) to interpersonal communication (McCombs et al., 2014). As a result, the high need for orientation leads to more attention to messages in the media, thereby increasing the effect of first-level agenda-setting.

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<sup>2</sup> Later, however, the classification by Weaver was criticized. In particular, attention was drawn to the fact that uncertainty was a meaningful parameter only if the issue was highly relevant (Matthes, 2006). If the problem is not of great importance to people, the lack of information will not encourage them to actively seek more information.

Thus, many factors influence public attention to certain issues. However, we can assume that the media play a significant role in bringing public attention to various problems.

### **Method**

Most previous agenda-setting studies have analyzed the impact of the discussion of a given issue on the attention paid to various aspects of the issue. This article suggests that the focus should not be on a specific empirical example, but that an attempt should be made to assess the cumulative effect of agenda-setting. In this work, I compare the open data of the Levada Center surveys (<https://www.levada.ru/en/>) on the most memorable events of the previous month according to Russians and the numbers of publications on these events in the Russian press for one week and one month prior to the survey. The survey is a monthly study by the Levada Center, and it usually takes place on the third Friday of each month. The Levada Center is the leading Russian nongovernmental research organization. Public opinion research is based on a representative nationwide sample of the urban and rural population consisting of 1,600 people aged 18 years and older in 136 settlements of 52 regions of Russia. The studies are conducted at the respondent's home using the face-to-face interview method. Sampling error does not exceed 3.4%. The question is presented as follows: "Which events of the past four weeks were most memorable to you?" The respondents are not given a list of events. The results are presented in a tabular format containing the list of events of the past month and the proportion of respondents who identify them as memorable.

I compared these data with the number of publications in the press on each of the events. To obtain this information, I used the Integrum base, which contains the contents of approximately 500 Russian magazines, more than 250 national and 1,000 regional newspapers. In this study, I used data on the number of articles on the event that were published within four weeks and one week prior to the date of the survey. Although respondents are asked about the events of the past month, it is logical to assume that the last week's incidents are the freshest in their memory, so this indicator was also important for the study. For each event mentioned in the Levada Center's survey, a request was made to estimate the number of articles in the press that had mentioned it. The analysis used information on the number of articles published in both federal newspapers, including electronic print media, and regional newspapers.

Thus, I considered the correlation between the intensity of the discussions in the press and the importance of various events only with respect to events that had been remembered by at least a small number of respondents. Those events that were not identified in the Levada Center surveys were not included in the analysis. Such events might not have been discussed very actively in the press. Even if it were possible to include all events of the month, such as those neglected by the population, doing so would probably not have changed the results significantly.

I focused on the events that occurred within a three-year period from January 2014 to December 2016. The collected database included 884 events, some of which were mentioned just once, whereas certain events were identified as the most important for many months in a row. Such events included ruble fluctuations, rising prices for consumer goods, military activities in Syria, changes in the price of oil, the

conflict in eastern Ukraine, and economic sanctions and the Russian food embargo.<sup>3</sup> Because those events that were referred to once and those that were systematically referred to as memorable may have attracted different levels of attention from citizens, this parameter was also taken into account in the analysis.

Public agenda issues compete for the attention of the audience (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988; McCombs & Zhu, 1995). So, not only is it important how much was written about the event in the media and at what point the discussion was the most intense, what was reported in the press at the same time is also important. Thus, if there was a memorable event within a month that attracted everyone's attention, other events that could have been quite extensively discussed in the media might not have been seen as important or remembered by the population. Following this logic, I created an additional variable, a coefficient of monopolizing public attention, which allowed me to control results for the general background of the discussion in each month.

The coefficient of monopolizing public attention is calculated by analogy with the Herfindahl-Hirshman index, which is used by economists to determine market concentration. In this study, I calculated this indicator as the sum of the squares of the ratios for respondents who identified the event as memorable. Calculations were made for the 10 events that were named most frequently in each month. Introducing this variable to the analysis—instead of a series of dichotomized ones (month-year)—allowed one quantitative variable to be used to control the background of the discussion (other events of the month).

Previous studies have suggested that the excessive reduction in communicative complexity that occurs when one issue (or one stereotypical interpretation of it) is extremely prevalent in the news is an indicator of crisis (Kleinnijenhuis, Schultz, & Oegema, 2015). Agenda-setting theory can be extended because the media tell us not only what issues to think about, but also how many issues we should think about (Tan & Weaver, 2013). At the same time, a situation in which one issue clearly dominates the agenda often indicates serious economic problems (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2015) or diplomatic conflicts (Suedfeld & Tetlock, 1977).

The coefficient of monopolization of public attention calculated on the basis of the Russian data generally confirms these assumptions (see Figure 1). The maximum value of this indicator in the period under review was reached in February–March 2014 in connection with the hosting of the XXII Winter Olympic Games in Russia (Pan & Lawal, 2017), as well as the mass protests in Ukraine (Maidan Nezalezhnosti [Independence Square])<sup>4</sup> and the annexation of Crimea by Russia (Boyd-Barrett, 2017; Hopf, 2016; Teper, 2016). Of course, the Olympic Games are not a negative event or a reflection of a crisis in society, but the

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<sup>3</sup> Discussions in the media of many of these events (the war in Syria [Brown, 2014, 2015], economic sanctions against Russia [Kazun, 2016], and the conflict in eastern Ukraine [Laruelle, 2016]) have already been the subjects of studies. I do not conduct a meaningful analysis of the press articles on these events herein. The purpose here is to analyze the impact of the intensity of the discussion of various events on the public's attention to these events.

<sup>4</sup> A mass months' long protest action in Kiev and a number of other cities in Ukraine (Zelinska, 2015), which began on November 21, 2013, in response to the suspension by the Ukrainian government of preparations for the signing of an association agreement between Ukraine and the European Union.

two other events may well be described as such. The war in eastern Ukraine<sup>5</sup> (Katchanovski, 2016; Makhortykh & Lyebiedyev, 2015) and the devaluation of the ruble,<sup>6</sup> which monopolized public attention in January 2015, as well as the terrorist attacks in France<sup>7</sup> and Russia<sup>8</sup> in November 2015, can also be seen as indicators of the crisis and of tension in society. Thus, the model took into account the presence of crisis events that may have influenced the agenda-setting effect.



**Figure 1. Coefficient of monopolization of public attention.**

<sup>5</sup> This concerns combat actions in the territory of Donetsk and the Lugansk regions of Ukraine, which started in April 2014. The combat operations were between the armed forces of Ukraine and the rebel groups (supporters of the self-proclaimed DPR and LPR—the Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics). Ukraine accuses the Russian Federation of interfering in the conflict.

<sup>6</sup> The sharp weakening of the Russian ruble in relation to foreign currencies was caused by the rapid decline in world oil prices. Oil exports are critical to Russia’s income. The weakening of the ruble was also caused by the imposition of economic sanctions against Russia (Mau, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> On November 13, 2015, three coordinated terrorist groups carried out a series of attacks in Paris and its nearest suburb, Saint-Denis. There were 130 victims, and more than 350 people were injured.

<sup>8</sup> On October 31, 2015, the largest plane crash in Russia’s aviation history occurred. An Airbus 321, a passenger airliner operated by the Russian airline Kogalymavia, was flying from the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh to St. Petersburg when it crashed on Egyptian territory. A total of 224 people were killed, almost all of them Russians. The cause of the catastrophe was a terrorist act for which ISIS claimed responsibility.

The following hypotheses were tested in this study:

- H1: The number of publications in the press on a certain event one and four weeks prior to the survey affects the proportion of respondents who identified the event as memorable.*
- H2: The discussion in the media immediately preceding the survey (one week before the survey) compared with the discussion throughout the entire month has a greater influence on the attention of respondents to a particular event during the last month.*
- H3: Those events about which the discussion was uneven throughout the month—and about which discussion intensified shortly before the survey—are better remembered by the respondents.*
- H4: If the event is identified as memorable in the previous months' surveys, it is better remembered by the respondents.*

This study follows a constructivist approach, according to which problems are the result of social construction (Spector & Kitsuse, 1987). As there are no situations that are automatically problematic (Fuller & Myers, 1941), there is no news that is important by definition. There are no criteria that would make it possible to determine what is more important for Russians: ruble fluctuations, the war in the east of Ukraine, or the terrorist attack in Paris. The significance of certain events is subjective.

### **Analysis of the Correlation Between Discussions in the Media and Public Attention to Different Events**

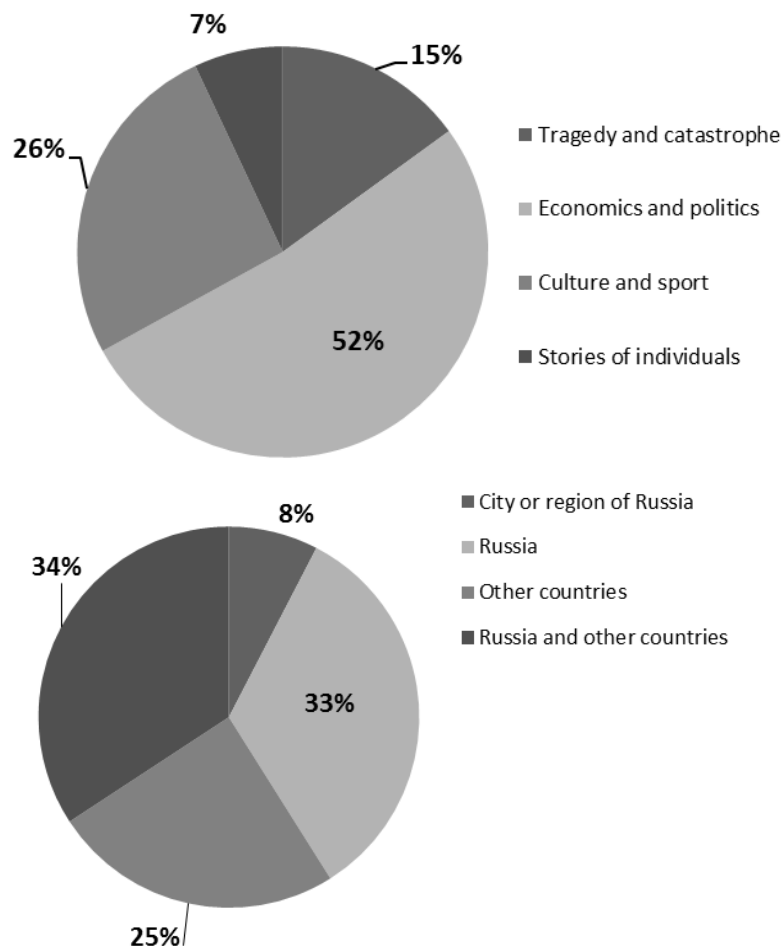
#### ***What Events Attracted the Attention of Russians in 2015?***

People best remember those events that aroused interest and attention, were widely discussed in society, and provoked debates (Oliver & Meyer, 1999). It is not surprising, therefore, that almost half of the events that were memorable to Russians in 2014–2016 fall into the category of economic or political issues (see Figure 2).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> It is not possible to distinguish between economic and political events, as these two areas have recently been significantly intertwined. Thus, I cannot definitively say whether economic sanctions are related more to the economy or to political decisions. The truth lies somewhere in the middle.





**Figure 2. Memorable events: Type and scale.**

**Source. Developed by the author, based on aggregating the results of the Levada Center surveys for 2014–2016. The graphs reflect the categories of events that were memorable to Russians.**

In fact, economic and political developments have been the most discussed issues in the past year: The annexation of Crimea, economic sanctions, the food embargo, oil prices, and ruble rates have become truly landmark topics in Russia in recent years. However, sports and cultural activities of all types (e.g., the 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi, the Eurovision contest, etc.) also attracted considerable public attention. Tragedies and catastrophes were significantly less remembered by Russians, which does not mean that interest in such incidents is low (Seib & Janbek, 2010). For example, the terrorist attacks in Paris (the attack on the office of *Charlie Hebdo*; Kiwan, 2016), the Saint-Denis attacks of November 2015, and the attack in Nice (July 2016) were remembered by a significant number of Russians. However, such events are less frequent than football matches, summits of heads of states, and so on, so their share in the list of memorable events is relatively small. However, only 7% of the events of 2014–2016 that

attracted the attention of Russians were stories of individuals, such as the illness and death of the Russian pop singer Jeanna Friske or the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich in 2015. Such news was mostly related to famous Russians. However, in some cases, events about ordinary people were remembered, as well as stories about foreign celebrities (e.g., Bob Dylan's Nobel Prize in 2016).

It should also be noted that most of the public's attention was naturally attracted by incidents that affected all of Russia and by international events in which Russia participated directly. International events affecting only foreign countries and incidents in certain cities or regions of Russia were less common on the list of the most memorable events. Thus, the attention of the audience was focused on news at the macroscale level that was directly relevant to the country. At the all-Russia level, people best remembered cultural and sports events, as well as news related to individuals (see Table 1). Most of the memorable events from the economic and political spheres were international. In fact, such patterns can, in many ways, be explained by the specific nature of Russia's relations with Western countries in recent years. The problems of geopolitics and the world economy were prominent on the agenda in 2014, and this situation continued and became more prominent in 2015 and 2016. As far as events outside Russia are concerned, the most public attention was drawn to tragedies and catastrophes (terrorist attacks, accidents, earthquakes, etc.).

**Table 1. Relationship Between the Nature of the Memorable Event and Its Scale.**

Nature of the event	Scale			
	City or region of Russia	Russia	Other countries	Russia and other countries
Tragedies and catastrophes, <i>n</i> (%)	<b>32 (24)</b>	<i>14 (11)</i>	<b>76 (58)</b>	9 (7)
Economy and politics, <i>n</i> (%)	9 (2)	132 (28)	114 (25)	<b>208 (45)</b>
Culture and sport, <i>n</i> (%)	15 (6)	<b>122 (51)</b>	22 (9)	80 (34)
Stories of individuals, <i>n</i> (%)	<b>12 (19)</b>	<b>31 (51)</b>	9 (15)	9 (15)

*Note.* Based on aggregating the results of the Levada Center surveys for 2014–2016. The statistically significant (5% level) positive correlations between a particular row and a specific column appear in bold type, and italic type highlights significant negative correlations.

The analysis of the most memorable events also confirms the idea that people remember both "unobtrusive" and "obtrusive" issues (McCombs et al., 1981). On the one hand, economic sanctions, the conflict in eastern Ukraine, the military actions in Syria, and the terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels, and Nice were cited as the most memorable events of the month during the period under review; these were unobtrusive issues with which people had no personal experience, and their assessments of these events were guided by the media. On the other hand, no less attention was given to the "obtrusive" issues, such as holidays (New Year, Easter, school graduation parties) or to the premieres of films, television series, and talk shows. Of course, these events were mostly remembered because of personal experience rather than discussions in the media. However, the proportion of "obtrusive" issues among the most memorable events of the last month was relatively low: approximately 10% during the period under review. Accordingly, most

of the events identified as the most memorable attracted public attention as a result of being discussed in the media rather than being part of personal experience.

### ***Memorable Events and Discussion in the Media***

Most of the information that we receive is mediated by the media, but the hypothesis of the correlation between the intensity of discussions in the media and the attention that the event attracts needs further verification. First, this is because public opinion is influenced by many other factors unrelated to mass communication. Thus, personal convictions and interests, interpersonal communication and the circle of communication, the very history of the discussion on the subject, and so forth, influence public opinion. Sometimes, these factors influence public opinion in different ways. For example, an event that has held a significant place on the agenda for a long time is better remembered by people (and thus may be called memorable in a public opinion poll); however, such an event may eventually bore people and stop attracting attention.

Thus, discussion in the media cannot fully explain people's perceptions of certain events. However, the correlation between the number of publications on the event in the media and the proportion of people who identified the event as important was quite strong. If the analysis used the number of publications for one week before the survey, the correlation was stronger (.54) compared with four weeks before the survey (.50).<sup>10</sup> Thus, we can assume that despite the wording of the question asking respondents to remember the most significant events of the past month, the respondent will name—as the most relevant event—the one that was actively discussed immediately before the survey.

However, intensity is not the only characteristic of discussion that influences the “memorableness” of the event. Regression analysis, while also demonstrating the impact of other factors, confirms my hypothesis that the number of articles in the press has an impact on the event (see Table 2). Thus, the models suggest that respondents are more likely to remember the news that emerged (or intensified) immediately before the survey. Accordingly, the larger the proportion of articles on the event that appeared in the last week before the study (in relation to the total number of articles per month), the more memorable the event. Thus, events that were actively discussed at the beginning of the month and were subsequently displaced from the media agenda by more recent news were much less frequently remembered at the time of the survey than were the events that might have been discussed less actively but had not yet been forgotten. Consequently, although the media do draw attention to certain events, the effect is very precarious, and what seemed to be important and interesting yesterday has been superseded by other events and thus has faded from public discussions and memory today. This pattern can be traced to the results of a previous study showing that issue volatility has been increasing over time (McCombs & Zhu, 1995).

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<sup>10</sup> The Pearson correlation coefficient is relevant at .001.

**Table 2. Regression Models (Dependent Variable: The Proportion of Respondents Identifying the Event as the Most Memorable).<sup>11</sup>**

Variable	Model			
	All events		Only "unobtrusive" events	
	1	2	3	4
Constant	1.948* (1.083)	3.269* (1.061)	1.502 (1.141)	2.793* (1.128)
Number of articles four weeks before the survey	0.002* (0.000)		0.002* (0.000)	
Number of articles one week before the survey		0.008* (0.001)		0.009* (0.001)
The proportion of news on the issue during the last week before the survey	0.098* (0.015)	0.060 * (0.014)	0.091* (0.015)	0.057* (0.015)
Predominance of national newspapers over regional ones	-3.653* (0.703)	-3.565* (0.692)	-3.589* (0.721)	-3.529* (1.229)
Event mentioned as important in previous surveys	5.136* (0.697)	5.038* (0.686)	4.910* (0.752)	5.176* (0.736)
Control for the coefficient of monopolization of public attention	0.001* (0.000)	0.001* (0.000)	0.001* (0.000)	0.001* (0.000)
Number of observations	884	884	790	790
$R^2$	.344	.362	.358	.371

Note. Standard errors appear within parentheses.

\* $p < .1$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

The fact that an event had been mentioned as important in the surveys conducted in previous months had a significant impact on the public's attention to certain events. If the event was extensively discussed and considered important in previous periods, even though the intensity of the discussions of the event was decreasing, public attention to it could be still maintained. Thus, events can be remembered not only because they are being discussed in the media during the current period, but also because of a certain "echo" of their previous popularity. For example, the tragedy in which 14 schoolchildren died during a boat

<sup>11</sup> To test the results for sustainability, I built regression models not only on a complete sample, but also on a sample that excluded "obtrusive" events, in which, theoretically, the influence of media on public opinion should be absent. In this case, I divided the events into "obtrusive" and "unobtrusive," disregarding existing assumptions that the parameter is more of a continuum than a dichotomy (Ju, 2014). As I did not have the opportunity to assess the relevance of the role of experience and the role of the media in shaping perceptions of each of the issues (i.e., to assess the obtrusiveness of the issue), I imputed the issues in question to those for which personal experience or, respectively, discussion in the media was a priority. Exclusion of obtrusive events from the sample did not change the results of the analysis.

trip on Lake Syamozero in Karelia (Russia), which took place in mid-June 2016 and attracted considerable public attention (Evstifeev & Petelin, 2016), was mentioned among the most memorable events of the month in July, August, and September. It is noteworthy that, although the media hardly wrote about this tragedy in August and September,<sup>12</sup> the event was cited as the most memorable by 11–12% of the respondents. This “echo” effect can also be significant; it is difficult for respondents to accurately connect events to the date when they occurred and to limit their responses to the events of the past four weeks, as indicated in the question.

It should also be noted that respondents better remembered those events for which the number of publications in the regional media exceeded the number of articles in the national press. At first glance, this conclusion seems unexpected, as we are dealing with an all-Russia survey of public opinion. In that case, it would be logical to assume that the discussion in the national press was a priority. It should be recalled, however, that the number of regional publications included in the study’s Integrum base was considerably higher than the number of all-Russia publications. Accordingly, it is quite logical to expect discussions of the relevant event to dominate the regional media. The greater number of articles in the national press, in this case, means that there was no “viral effect.” This is the case when the event, which was covered by the major newspapers and news agencies, had not attracted the attention of smaller newspapers. This is generally the case with respect to events that have no direct impact on the lives of citizens, such as the International Economic Forum in Davos or the Russian delegation’s denial of the right to vote in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Although important for the country as a whole, the news is not relevant to most citizens and, consequently, is not covered by regional newspapers, which prefer to focus on more urgent events.

The coefficient of monopolization of public attention used in the model as a reference variable was also significant and positively correlated to remembering various events. A greater focus on the news during times of crisis can be related to people’s desire to monitor existing threats (Shoemaker, 1996). During times of uncertainty, the media become a major source of information for the population (Wu, Stevenson, Chen, & Güner, 2002), and news begins to attract more attention (Quiring & Weber, 2012).

### **Discussion**

Much of our knowledge of today’s world is mediated by mass communication. Most of the events ignored by the media do not really exist for us. In this regard, it is logical to assume that the intensity of media debate influences public attention to certain issues, as claimed by supporters of agenda-setting theory. My analysis confirms this assumption. Even if respondents are asked about the most memorable events of the past month, the number of press articles published a week before the study is more important. Thus, the news has low resilience: People perceive the events that are taking place right now as the most important, with the exception of some incidents that attract a high level of public attention. I can also argue

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<sup>12</sup> In August and September, newspapers at the federal and regional levels published approximately 50–60 articles per month on this event, whereas several thousand articles were published on other events identified during this period as being memorable and important.

that the prolonged retention of an event on the information agenda draws public attention to it, and the intensity of the discussion of this event immediately prior to the survey is also significant.

According to agenda-setting theory, the maximum correlation between discussions in the media and public opinion can be achieved in the case of totalitarian states, where freedom of the media is virtually nonexistent (McCombs et al., 2014). From this point of view, the limited independence of the Russian media (Fredheim, 2017; Gehlbach, 2010) should have contributed to the greater overlap of public and individual agendas. However, the value of the correlation coefficient between the number of articles in the press on the event and the proportion of Russians considering the event to be important is comparable to similar figures obtained by researchers in the United States (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003; Swanson & Swanson, 1978; Wanta & Ghanem, 2007; Wanta et al., 2004). Perhaps this can be explained by the gradually increasing role of the Internet as a source of information, as well as by the presence of independent or opposition print media in Russia.

This study has some limitations. First, only the agenda of the print media was analyzed. It is possible that the coverage of events on the TV news, as well as on social networks and blogs, was different from the discussion in the newspapers. At the same time, some studies have shown similarities in the agendas of the press, television, and the Internet (Belt, Just, & Crigler, 2012; Hester & Gibson, 2003; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Shapiro & Hemphill, 2017; Wallsten, 2007). In this case, focusing on the analysis of articles in the press does not significantly affect the results obtained. Nevertheless, a further quantitative study comparing the agendas of different types of media in Russia seems promising, especially in view of the greater independence of the press as compared with television.

However, the peculiarities of media consumption alone cannot explain the differences among the individual agendas. It should also be borne in mind that the process of obtaining information could have multiple stages (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Robinson, 1976). Some Russians do not receive information directly from the media, but rather from "opinion leaders" through interpersonal communication. This channel of information is particularly important when the information provided by traditional media appears to be incomplete and inaccurate. In such a situation, more than 30% of Russians prefer to check the information received by consulting with their relatives and acquaintances ("Current Situation and Prospects of Media Literacy," 2016). Accordingly, the social environment is no less important than the flow of media. In addition, people may first pay attention to the information that is most relevant or related to their views (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989; Festinger, 1962). For example, the annual rock festival "Nashestvie" most likely drew the attention of a certain group of people rather than the entire population of the country. Thus, the attention to one or another issue is distributed unevenly among different social groups, as noted by the authors of the agenda-melding concept (Ragas & Roberts, 2009; Shaw, McCombs, Weaver, & Hamm, 1999). In this study, I did not account for the individual characteristics of respondents and the particulars of their social environment, as the purpose of this study was to identify general trends. However, because I was dealing with data from a representative survey at the level of Russia as a whole, and because I was examining the problem at the level of society as a whole, there should have been no significant shifts.

This article assesses the impact on public opinion of only one factor: the intensity of the discussions of certain events in the media. The correlation between these indicators was approximately .5, and the

regression models explained approximately 35% of the spread in values of the variable “proportion of people who identified the event as memorable.” As for the remaining variations in remembering certain events, they were probably related to such factors as the individual characteristics of people, their social environment, and their media consumption.

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