



## THE KYRGYZ MEDIA'S PORTRAYAL OF THE CRIMEAN CRISIS AND ITS IMPACT ON KYRGYZ PUBLIC OPINION

**Kulpunai BARAKANOVA**

Student, International Relations Department, Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University  
*Kulpunai\_B@mail.ru*

### Abstract

This paper is devoted to the news coverage of the Crimean crisis by the Kyrgyz mass media. Nearly all Kyrgyz mass media, including popular internet news sources, covered the annexation of the Crimean peninsula by the Russian Federation. However, despite facts that provide evidence that an annexation took place some Kyrgyz news institutions and the majority of Kyrgyz citizens did not call the event an annexation; instead, citizens and media typically used more 'neutral' words to describe this event. Data for this paper is based on a frame analysis of two popular Kyrgyz internet news sources, *Akipress* and *Vecherniy Bishkek*. The aim of this analysis is to identify the ideological orientation of mass media presentations of the Crimean crisis. Some Kyrgyz media have a pro-Russia ideological orientation. Data on Kyrgyz public opinion is based on responses to a questionnaire.

**Keywords:** Crimean crisis, *Akipress*, *Vecherniy Bishkek*, frame analysis, Kyrgyz public opinion.

### Introduction

This study focuses on the phenomenon of framing in Kyrgyz mass media by examining the influence of Russian discourse on news coverage of the Crimean Crisis and its impact on Kyrgyz public opinion. It is important to position contemporary framing in Kyrgyz mass media within a larger historical context.

Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century there has been close interaction between Kyrgyzstan and Russia in many spheres of life. After becoming part of the USSR, Kyrgyzstan adopted a policy of total control over mass media. In 1991, after independence, Kyrgyzstan officially recognized liberal-democratic values and freedom of the press began to prosper. After the 2005 revolution which overthrew the Akaev regime, mass media became more pro-western in its orientation. After the Bakiev regime was toppled in 2010 media adopted a pro- Russian orientation. Today there is an informational war between pro-western and pro-Russian media within the territory of Central Asia and particularly in Kyrgyzstan. The West sponsors projects on promoting the ideas of democracy, human rights, and free media. Meanwhile, Russia aims to establish media institutions that promote pro-Russian political, educational, and cultural programmes. Russia seems to be winning the informational war by using an old

but effective strategy of emphasizing common history, culture, and that status of the Russian minority population in Kyrgyzstan.

Soon after the joining the Crimean peninsula to Russia the Kyrgyz parliament committee on informational security started to discuss limiting the broadcasting of Russian federal channels because of one-sided news broadcasting. (<http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/25307754.html> n.d.). It is quite noticeable that after the Crimean referendum Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian countries were unsure how to formulate a position on the Crimean referendum on whether Crimea should become part of Russia. On 11 March, 2014, the Kyrgyz Republic's Foreign Affairs Ministry made a statement stating that the Ukrainian and Crimean crisis should be solved peacefully and according to the UN charter and international law. However, soon after, on 21 March, 2014, the Foreign Ministry of the Kyrgyz Republic made another statement that was ambiguous regarding both the referendum and annexation. On the one hand it stated that the Crimean referendum was a free expression of Crimean's will. On the other hand the Ministry emphasized that all issues around the Ukrainian crisis should be solved according to international law.

Given the nature of Kyrgyz civil society it was not surprising that people perceived the ongoing referendum as lawful. A majority of older Kyrgyz citizens did not see the event of joining as an annexation but as a willingness on Russia's part to "protect" Crimeans' essential human rights. In fact many common people approved the referendum based on their belief that Crimean voters were exercising a right of self-determination. Some political parties such as Ata-Jurt defended the legality of the Crimean referendum as well as its outcome.

### **Literature Review**

Framing in media refers to information that is selected for presentation and how selection determines salience. Robert Entman (1993) offered a detailed explanation of how media provides audiences with schemas to interpret different events. According to Entman, "to frame" means "to select some piece of information and by using specific language make that message salient and more observable" (1993, 52). The content of selected information is influenced by decisions about how to define a problem, how to distinguish cause from effect, moral evaluation and recommendations on what is to be done. According to William Gamson (1992) there are three main functions of frames: diagnosing, evaluation and prescription.

Framing in media shapes the world-view of people and plays a vital role in constructing social reality (Johnson-Cartee 2005). At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars on mass media studies came to the conclusion that media is not merely a means to enlighten the public. Media

also plays an essential role in constructing and interpreting social reality. Thus, the news is presented as 'constructed reality' from the journalists' point of view. Taking this into account John Tankard (2001) characterizes framing as a process of selective interpretation of particular parts of information.

Framing emphasizes behavioral aspects of news stories: the main thing is not what is being communicated but how it is being communicated and presented. Framing theory originates from interdisciplinary research that includes sociology, linguistics and psychology. From a psychological point of view framing creates subtle differences in how information is presented and thus perceived (Reese 2007). In other words, how we interpret information is significantly influenced by how that information is framed or presented. For example, a political event can be defined as "winning" or "losing" or as "annexation" or "joining".

Mass media provide frames to interpret information. Framing paradigms consist of two types: media (news) frame and audience frame. "Media or news frame is a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of event. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue" (W. A. Gamson 1989)

### **Framing: Crimean Crisis**

The sample examined here is aimed at a comparison of two different ideological orientations in Kyrgyz mass media. The data set consists of two internet news sources – *Akipress* and *Vecherniy Bishkek*. *Akipress* identifies itself as neutral, but is considered more liberal by many observers. *Vecherniy Bishkek* is considered populist in orientation. Both are published in the city of Bishkek and are considered major metropolitan news sources. This study relies entirely on internet sources. The timeframe is limited to the period of Crimean events. The events in Crimea started at the end of February, 2014 and ended at the end of March, 2014.

For frame analysis the positive and negative frames regarding to Russia were identified. For the completeness of analysis, each primary positive/negative frame is broken down into separate framing segments, also called 'idea elements'.

#### **Positive media framing segments:**

##### **1 – Return of Crimea to the motherland:**

- Crimean self-defense forces
- Unknown soldiers
- Joining Crimea to Russia
- Historical ties

2 – Crimean Referendum and legal framing:

- Right of self-determination
- Observance of democratic principles
- Kosovo precedent

3 - Russia is not invader but rescuer:

- Threat of *Right Sector* (a neo-nationalist group that protested in Maidan against Russia)
- Attempt to protect Russian, Tatars and other minorities in Crimea
- Common language, history and culture

4 – External forces are trouble makers:

- The West supported the Maidan protestors
- The USA – troublemaker

**Negative media framing segments:**

1- Annexation of Crimea:

- Invasion
- Annexation
- Russian soldiers in Crimea

2- Crimean Referendum is illegitimate:

- The presence of military force
- New Ukrainian government is the legitimate legal authority

3- Russia is the aggressive state:

- Putin – invader
- Attempt by Russia to preserve its influence over Ukraine

4 – Violation of UN Charter and international law framing segments:

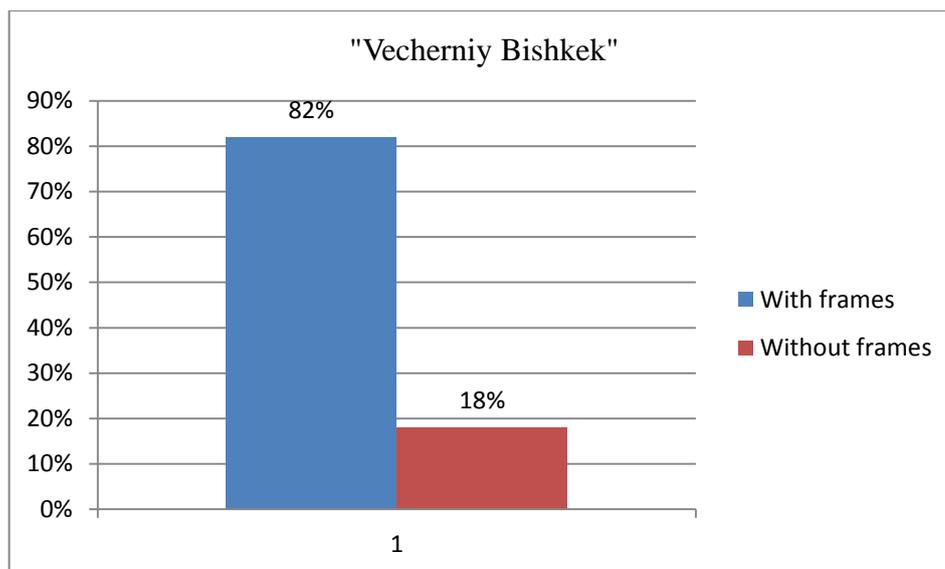
- Ukraine's territorial integrity is important
- Constitution of Ukraine of 1992 should be observed

Further findings are presented in the following order: location of frames, quantity of articles containing frames, frequency of the four positive/negative frames found in articles, and criteria of authenticity. A criterion of authenticity needed to define if two news sources use own or foreign sources. It is important to know what kind of news sources are used in news coverage of *Akipress* and *Vecherniy Bishkek*. Foreign news sources also play a significant role in the process of news framing.

Location of frames: *Akipress* articles have largely presented frames in full-text, four articles used frames in headlines, two positive and two negative. The rest of the articles used

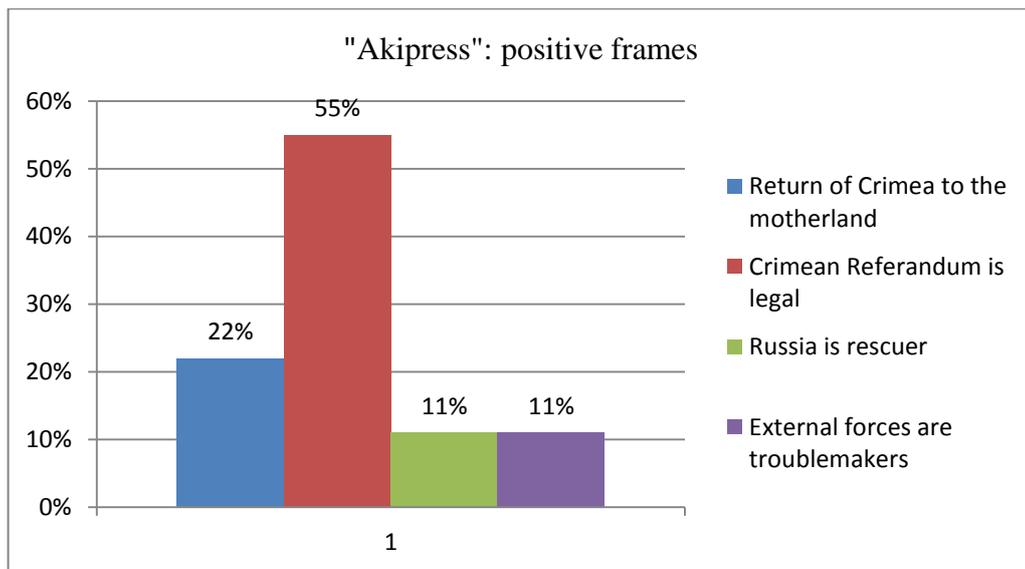
frames in the text. *Vecherniy Bishkek*'s articles have six headlines with positive framing and two headlines with negative framing. The other thirty eight articles use frames within the text. The use of frames in headlines refers to the central point of the articles. If articles do not contain any positive/negative frames regarding to Russia then those articles are considered to be articles without frames. All articles containing the word "Crimea" that were published online at *Vecherniy Bishkek* and *Akipress* between 27.02-27.03.2015 were investigated as articles about Crimean crisis. Though each contains some information about Crimea, not all of have frames about Crimean crisis. For example, an article with title "the Renaissance of Soviet" contained three sentences that mentioned such words as 'Crimea', 'Ukraine' and 'Maidan protests' yet it does not contain frames. The article talks about the domestic problems of Kyrgyzstan and in some places compares the revolution of 2010 with the Ukrainian Maidan protests. The main topic in the article is about "Soviet Kyrgyzstan" not the Crimean crisis. Therefore the article is classified as not having frames.

Quantity of articles containing frames:

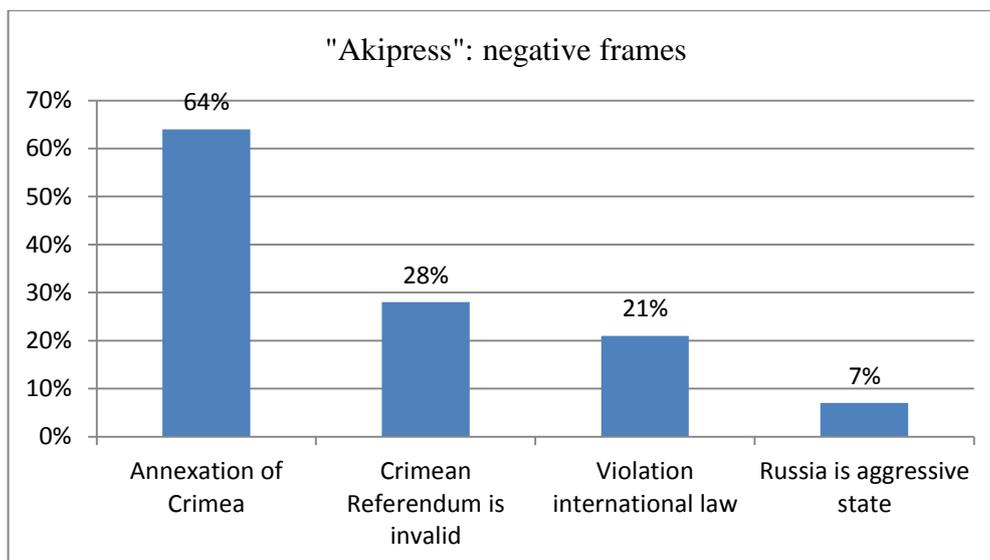


Most *Vecherniy Bishkek* articles include positive/negative frames. About 82% of articles have frames and 18% are without frames. *Akipress* articles use frames slightly more than *Vecherniy Bishkek*. 85% of *Akipress* articles have frames and 15% are without frames. These statistics show that media presentations of the Crimean Crisis in these two sources had an agenda for the time period under investigation.

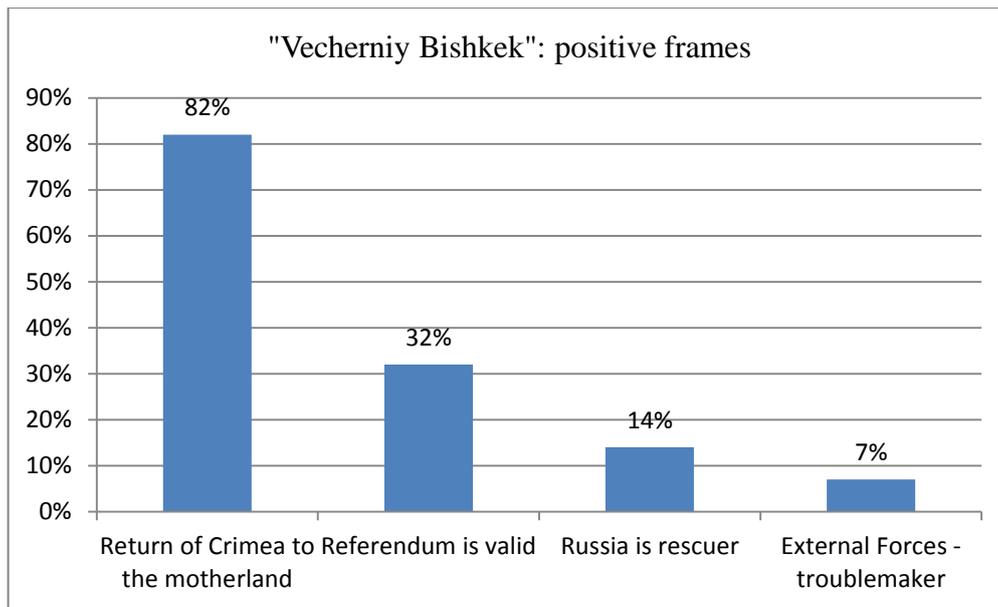
Frequency of the four positive/negative frames:



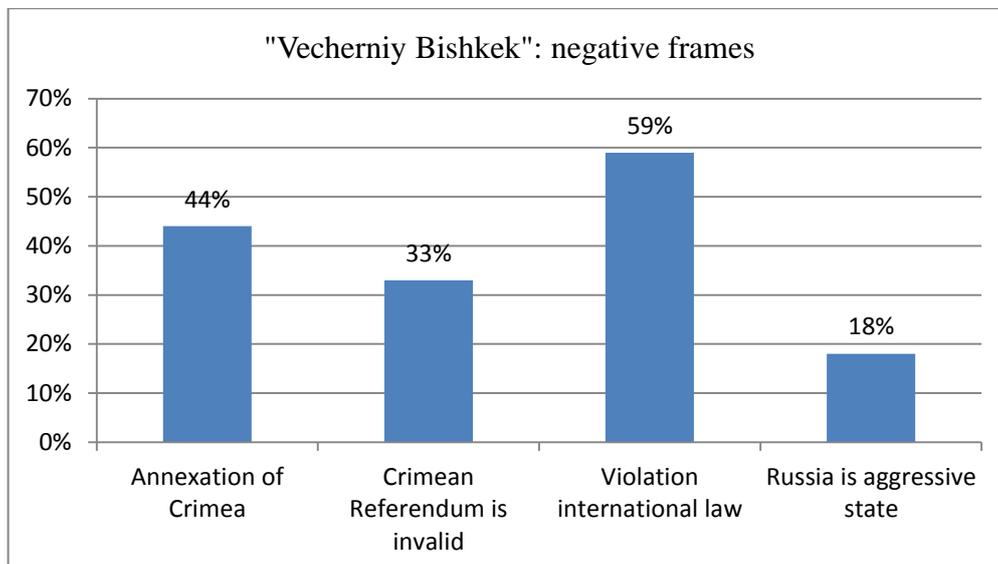
The four most frequently used positive frames are: “Crimean Crisis is legal” (55%); “Return of Crimea to the motherland” (22%); “Russia is rescuer” (11%); and “External forces are troublemakers” (11%).



Among the negative frames in *Akipress* articles 64% are about “Annexation of Crimea” and 28% of are about “Crimean Referendum is invalid”. Frames about Russian aggression and violations of international law made up 7% and 21%. The articles with “Annexation of Crimea” frames were full of criticisms regarding Russian imperial ambitions towards the entire post-Soviet sphere.

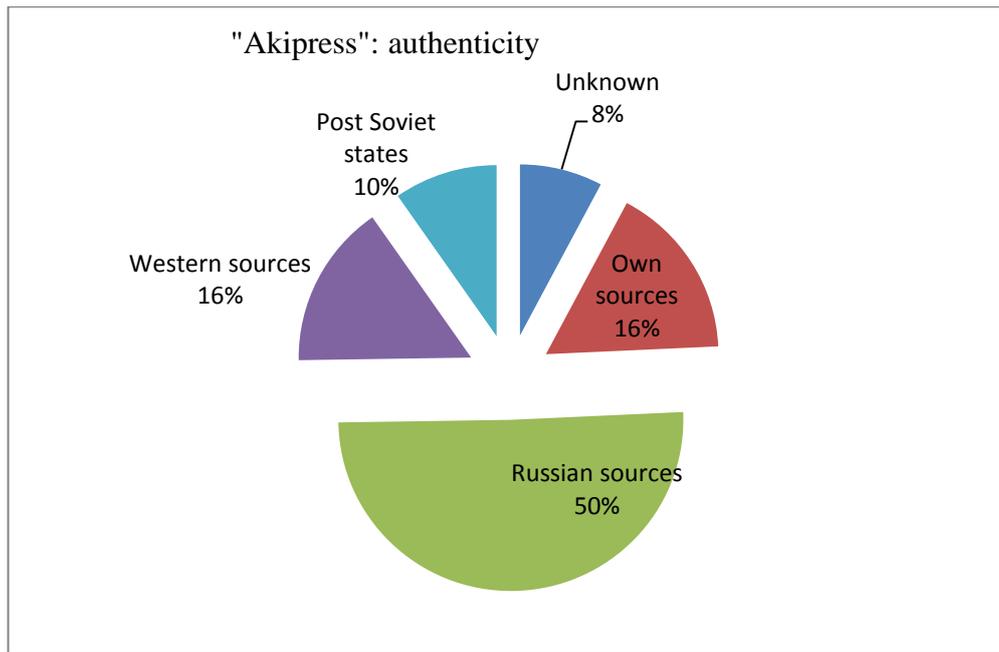


Among *"Vecherniy Bishkek"* articles the most frequent frame was "Return of Crimea to the motherland"- 82%. *Vecherniy Bishkek* articles contain a great deal of pro-Russian frames because among all foreign sources Russian sources make up 52%. *Akipress* relies on own sources 48% of the time.

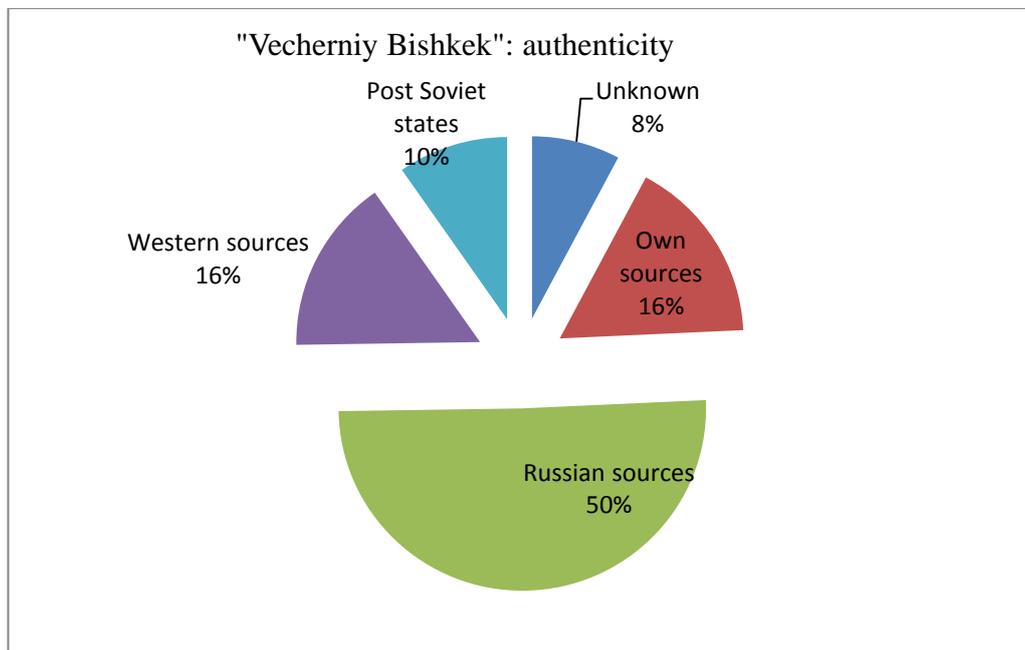


*Vecherniy Bishkek* used the negative frame of "Russia is aggressive state" (59%) and "Annexation of Crimea" (44%). Such statistics show that *Vecherniy Bishkek* instead of using negative frames about annexation and the referendum prefers to emphasize "the violation of international law". This shows that instead of focusing on political issues such as aggression *Vecherniy Bishkek* frames the Crimean crises in terms of international law.

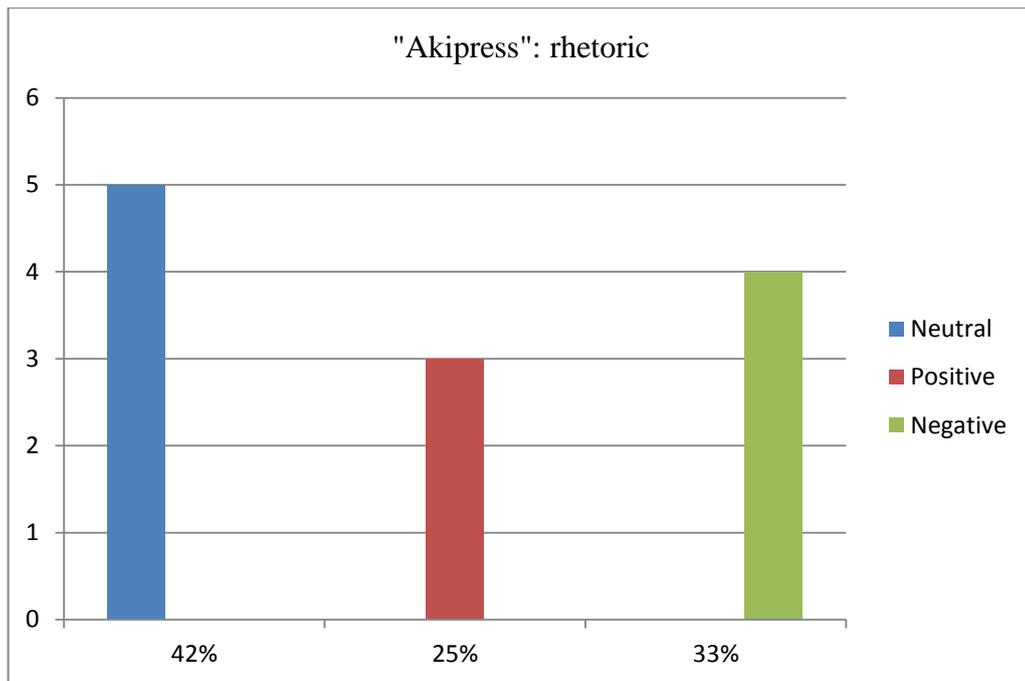
## Criteria of authenticity



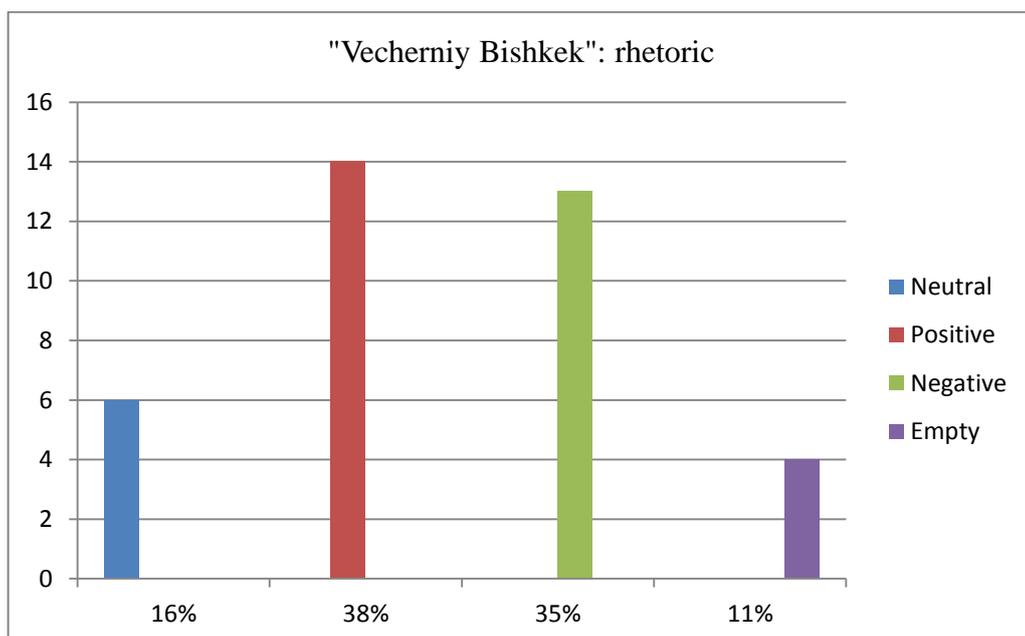
*Akipress* uses 48% own-sources % 14 Western news sources like “Atlántico, le Figaro” and other sources.



Looking at *Vecherniy Bishkek* almost 50% of the sources were comprised of Russian news agencies for world news coverage. Own-sources make up about only 16% and that implies that *Vecherniy Bishkek* presents a more pro-Russian position than “Akipress”.



From the standpoint of rhetorical frames articles in *Akipress* aspire to be more neutral (42%) followed by articles with negative rhetoric (33%).



In *Vecherniy Bishkek* 38% of articles are positive. There is a great deal of pro-Russian rhetoric in these articles. Taking into account that nearly 50% *Vecherniy Bishkek's* news sources are taken from popular Russian news agencies like lenta.ru and RIA novosti it appears the authors very carefully choose words to describe the Crimean event as 'something good rather than annexation'. Moreover, Russia is not accused of aggressive actions in Crimea. Articles with negative rhetoric are about 35%. That is also a significant number. Apart from Russian news

sources in *Vecherniy Bishkek* news coverage also used 16% western, 16% own, 10% post-Soviet countries news sources. It is obvious that western news sources cover the Crimean crisis more critically. The news sources of post-Soviet states like Kazakhstan also present the crisis critically. The interviews that were taken by *Vecherniy Bishkek* journalists with political elites and analysts are very cautious on the imperial aspirations of Russia regarding to post-Soviet states. 16% of articles are neutral. Most short news articles were aimed more at informing the audience than ‘framing’ and thus deploy neither positive nor negative rhetoric; these articles are neutral.

Between 27 February and 27 March, 2014, *Akipress* news published twenty online articles about the Crimean crisis. Twelve are news articles and eight are editorials. The average number of words per article is about 487. In terms of word frames, negative frames make up the majority. Among the rhetorical frames neutral frames make up the majority.

Looking at *Vecherniy Bishkek*, forty nine articles were published online within the given period of time. Thirty seven are news and twelve are editorial articles. The average number of words is about 350. This means that *Vecherniy Bishkek* is less focused on analytic articles. *Vecherniy Bishkek* contains more positive word frames. Regarding rhetorical frames there are slightly more positive than negative frames. To sum up, *Akipress* uses less pro-Russian rhetorical frames. And when using foreign news sources it prefers to use western rather than Russian sources. *Vecherniy Bishkek* by contrast prefers to use more Russian news sources which are ideologically and linguistically framed. For this reason *Vecherniy Bishkek* articles contain more positive rhetorical word frames regarding the Crimean crisis. In using foreign sources it prefers to use Russian sources as well as sources from post-Soviet countries rather than western sources.

### **The relationship between media and public opinion**

The term “public opinion” has two meanings, methodological and institutional. According to the first definition public opinion is a sum of subjective thoughts and ideas of a group of people (Kuharchuk 2006). The second definition calls public opinion the social institution that plays an important role in a society.

Sometimes public opinion is formed independently from the media. However media almost always influences the formation of public opinion. There are two basic models that explain relations between media and public opinion. The first is a pluralistic model that is based on the claim that public opinion is formed independently of media influence. According to this view media and public opinion are independent; each possesses a separate authority in politics. If this view is correct media and public opinion can have separate impacts on political decision-making processes.

In opposition to the pluralistic model, the elite model claims there is interdependence between media, public opinion and elite. The elite model implies that most social and political power is concentrated in the hands of the elite. And therefore both media and public opinion are considered to be dependent on elite. The elite control media and media in turn shapes public opinion (Smith 2012).

The results of frame analysis show that *Akipress* uses mostly negative frames, especially, "Crimean annexation by Russia". However, *Akipress* articles that contain positive frames that are focused on, "Crimean referendum is valid". *Vecherniy Bishkek* articles contain more positive frames, in particular with respect to the frame "Return of Crimea to the motherland". The negative frames are less frequent and the most frequent negative frame is about the violation of international law. After defining the most frequent frames encountered in articles a questionnaire was prepared. To learn whether popular Kyrgyz internet news sources such as *Akipress* and *Vecherniy Bishkek* significantly impact Kyrgyz public opinion regarding the Crimean crisis I designed questions aimed at identifying the presence in public opinion of frames frequently used by *Akipress* and *Vecherniy Bishkek*. Analysis of the questionnaire shows that responses of Bishkek citizens include ultra and moderate pro-Russian and some western viewpoints. In total one hundred respondents were questioned, fifty seven of them are young people whose age is from fifteen to thirty years old. Twenty seven respondents are of middle age: from thirty one to fifty years old. And sixteen of respondents are elderly whose age is from fifty one to eighty. Two of fourteen questions are social-demographic questions and the remaining twelve are about the Crimean crisis.

The response for only one question was pro-Western. This counts as evidence in favor of the claim that negative frames in *Akipress* have influenced public opinion at least slightly. Four questions have ultra-pro-Russian positions that *Akipress* and *Vecherniy Bishkek* do not encourage. A plausible explanation for this is that Russian media such as Channel One Russia have a direct impact on Kyrgyz public opinion in interpreting the Crimean Crisis. The remaining seven questions have moderate pro-Russian frames that are frequently encountered in *Vecherniy Bishkek* articles.

## Conclusion

To summarize, *Akipress* publishes analytical articles based on analysis that uses different frames than *Vecherniy Bishkek*. From the standpoint of ideological orientation *Akipress* is more pro-western than pro-Russian. By contrast, *Vecherniy Bishkek* is a populist newspaper that relies on more Russian sources; and that is why it is identified as more pro-

Russian. The impact of *Akipress* articles on public opinion is real but it appears to be insignificant. *Vecherniy Bishkek* frames have a greater influence on Kyrgyz public opinion because it more pro-Russian and this orientation is more likely to be accepted by Kyrgyz citizens. This helps to explain why some respondents chose more ultra and moderate pro-Russian responses. In general, Kyrgyz citizens prefer to follow news sources that are populist and pro-Russian rather than analytical and which draw not only on Russian sources, but also western sources as well. *Akipress* news coverage of the Crimean crisis is arguably more analytic compared to *Vicherniy Bishkek*. In addition, elderly Kyrgyz citizens prefer to watch world news from Russian channels and the young actively uses Russian social sites such as *Odnoklassniki* and *Vkontakte* where Russian news prevails.

## Appendix

### Questions of questionnaire

1. Age: A) 15-30                      B) 31-50                      C) 51-80
2. Sex: A) male                      B) female
3. On 27 of February 2014 in Simferepol (Crimean penunsula) an airport was captured. Who do you think were the men that captured the airport?
  - A) Russian soldiers
  - B) Unknown people in masks
  - C) Ukrainian soldiers
  - D) Self-defence forces of Crimea
  - E) Do not know
4. In your opinion what is Crimean Crisis?
  - A) Return of Crimea to motherland (Russia)
  - B) Annexation of Crimea by Russia
  - C) Joining of Crimea to Russia by referendum
  - D) Other
5. Previously Crimea was a part of Russia (about three centuries). In 1954 N. Khrushchev gave it to Ukraine. In your opinion this transmission of territory was:
  - A) Illegal
  - B) Legal and official
  - C) A mistake by Khrushchev
  - D) Unofficial
6. Crimea is a:
  - A) Strategic interest of Russia
  - B) A part of Ukraine
  - C) Historical part of Russia
  - D) Other

7. Why was it important to Russia that Crimea join the Russian Federation?

- A) Black Sea marine base in Sevastopol
- B) Economic gain
- C) Ensuring security and rights for the Crimean people
- D) Other
- E) None of the above

8. Crimean Referendum is:

- A) Free expression of popular will by the Crimean people
- B) Falsification of votes in the referendum
- C) Violation of international law
- D) Do not know

9. In 2008 Kosovo separated from Serbia and became an independent state. The international community recognized this event by framing it in terms of international law. Taking this into consideration, in your opinion a declaration of independence by Crimea and joining to Russia is:

- A) Similar to the Kosovo event, that's why it could be considered legal
- B) Is not similar to the Kosovo event, that's why it could be considered illegal
- C) A special event
- D) Do not know

10. Russia is a:

- A) Rescuer
- B) Aggressor and invader
- C) Defender of the rights of the Crimean people
- D) None of the above

10. Was there a threat from Right Sector (nationalists in Maidan) in Crimea?

- A) No
- B) Yes
- C) Do not know

11. Did external forces support the Maidan protests?

- A) No, it was just civil protests
- B) Yes, the main force was the USA
- C) Do not know

13. In 2008 Russia:

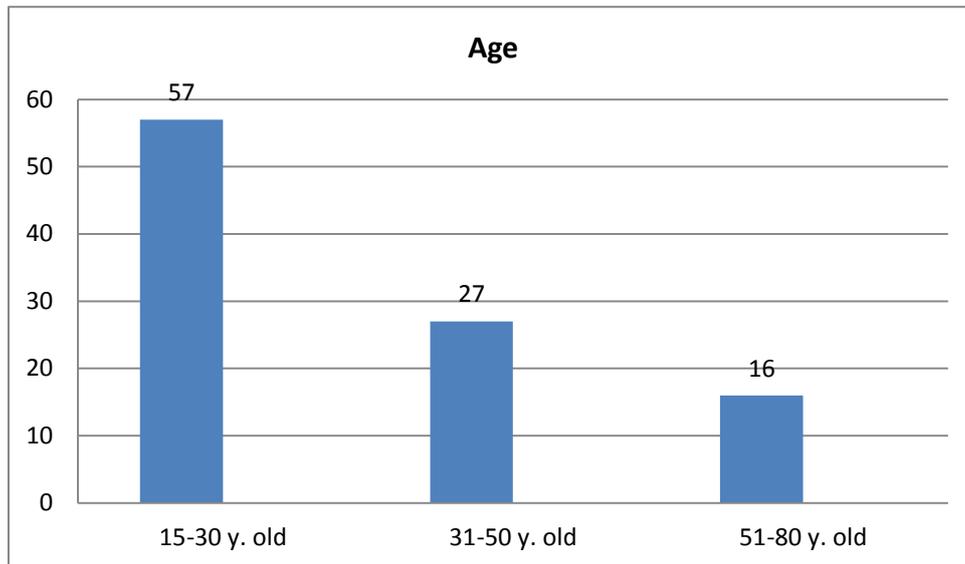
- A) Recognized the independence of Kosovo
- B) Didn't recognize independence of Kosovo
- C) Abstained
- D) Do not know

14. What is important for you, the territorial integrity of Ukraine or will of the Crimean people?

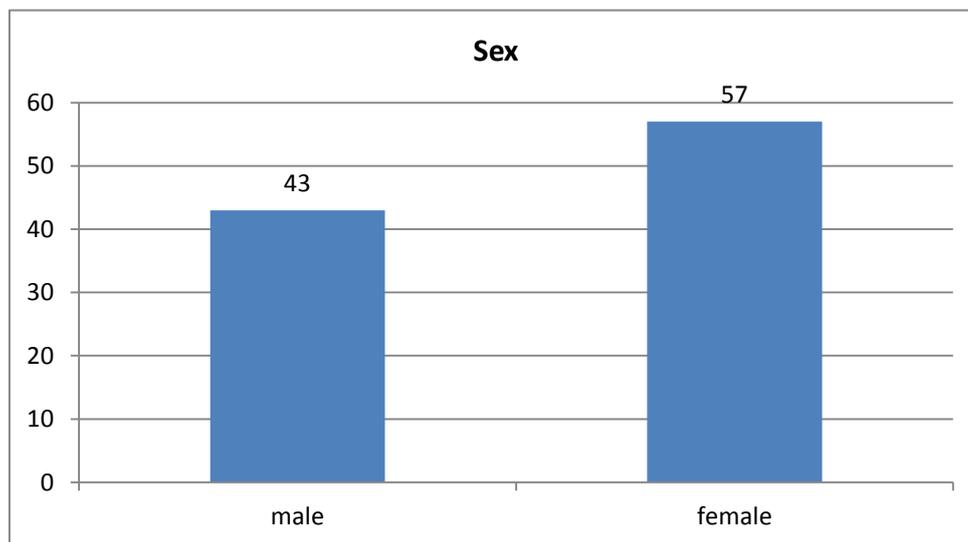
- A) The territorial integrity of Ukraine
- B) Will of Crimean people
- D) Other

### Results of questionnaire and findings

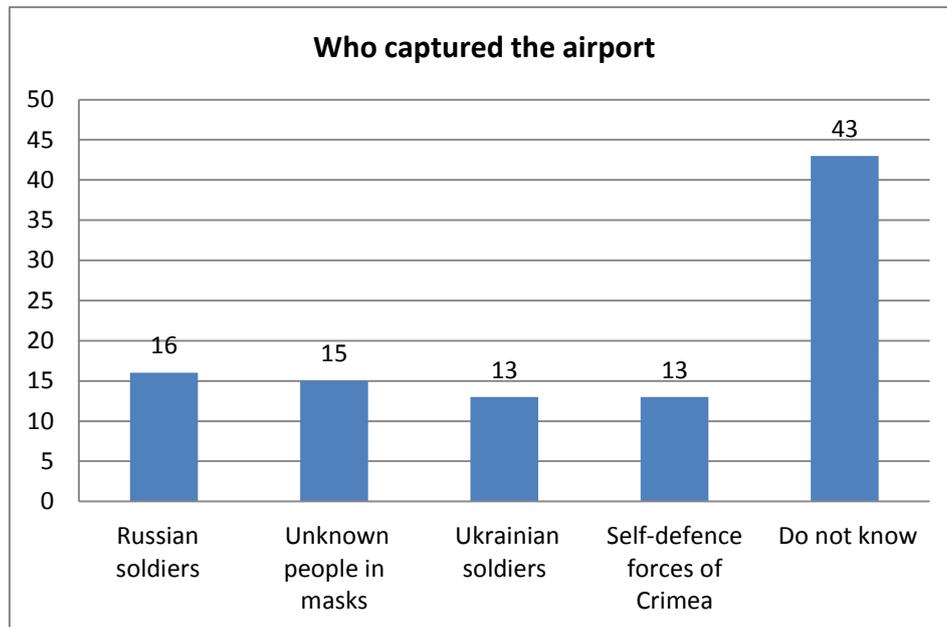
Graph #1



Graph #2

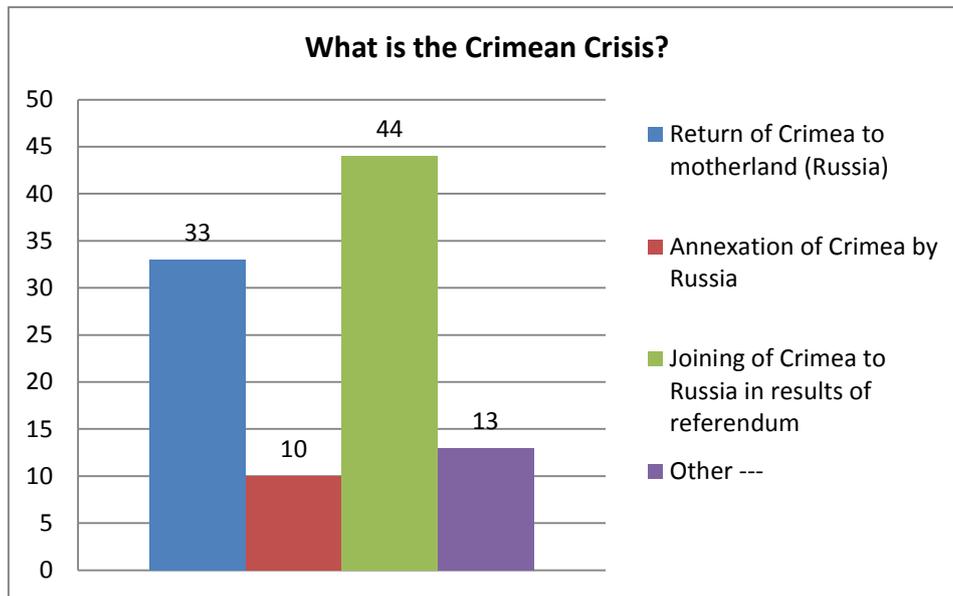


Graph #3



On date of 27 March 2014 airport in Simferopol was captured (a capital city of Crimea). Both *Akipress* and *Vecherniy Bishkek* have encompassed this news. To a question “who in your opinion captured the airport in Simferopol” many respondents answered unsure. Only 16% of respondents answered “Russian soldiers” (this answer is supposed to be right). 15% responded “unknown people in masks”, Russian and pro-Russian media usually used a such kind of description. Even if Russian news abstained to call the invaders as Ukrainian soldiers 13% of respondents supposed that Ukrainian soldiers had a chance to capture it. Russian and pro-Russian news presented the invaders as self-defence forces of Crimea and about 13% respondents chose this option. And a huge number of people really do not know who actually captured the airport, about 43% of respondents. The important point here is that *Akipress* calls those who captured airport as Russian soldiers and *Vecherniy Bishkek* names them just as “unknown people in masks”. The most interesting thing is that in Russian and pro-Russian news the invaders were not called as Ukrainian soldiers but 13% of respondents chose such option as well. So it means that some respondents think that Russian soldiers could not capture and it seems to them that Ukrainians could do that. This displays that some respondents are ultra-pro-Russian or disinformed or missinformed about this issue.

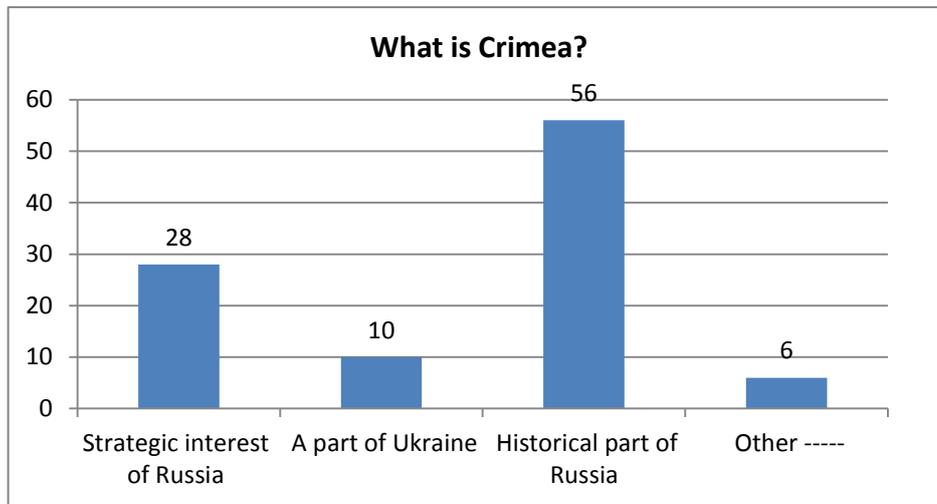
Graph #4



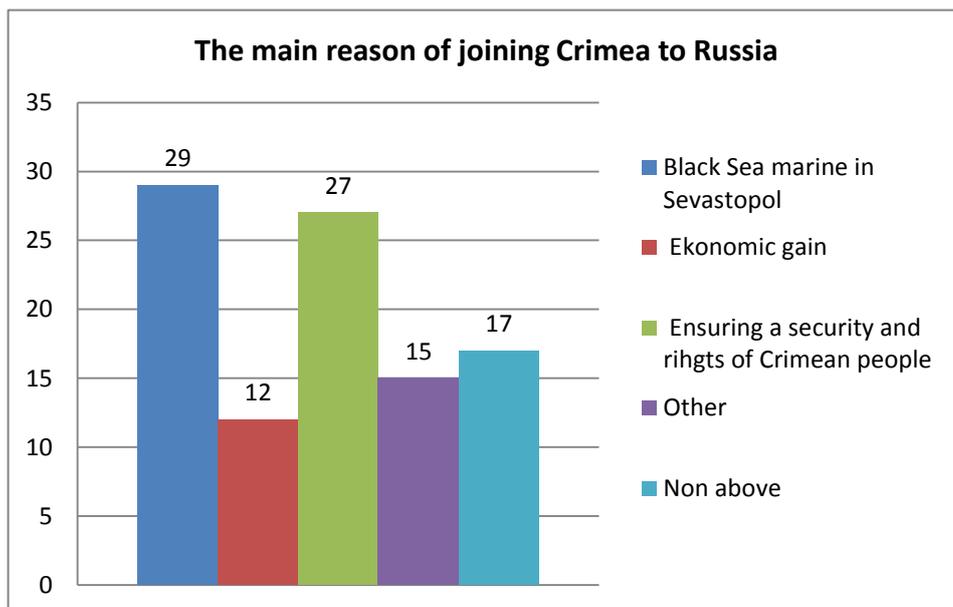
Graph #5



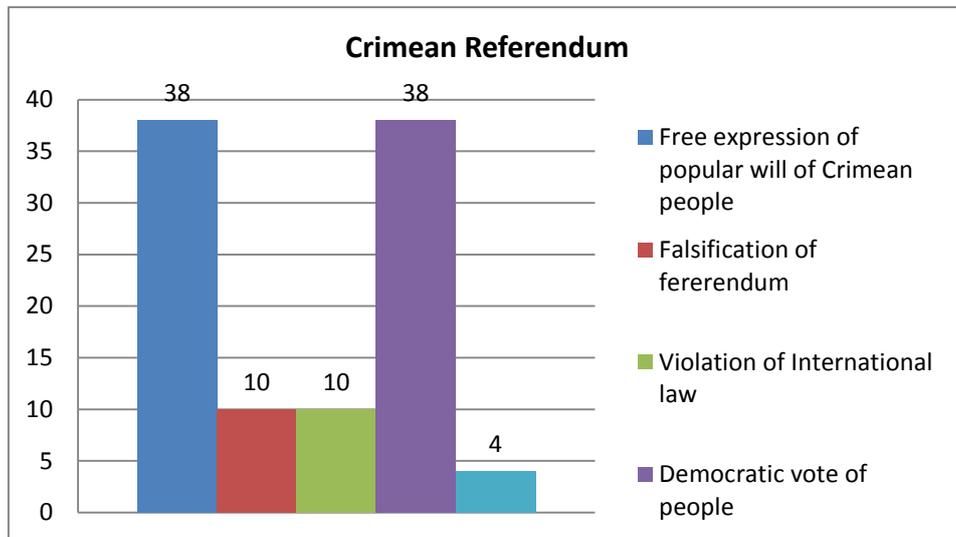
Graph #6



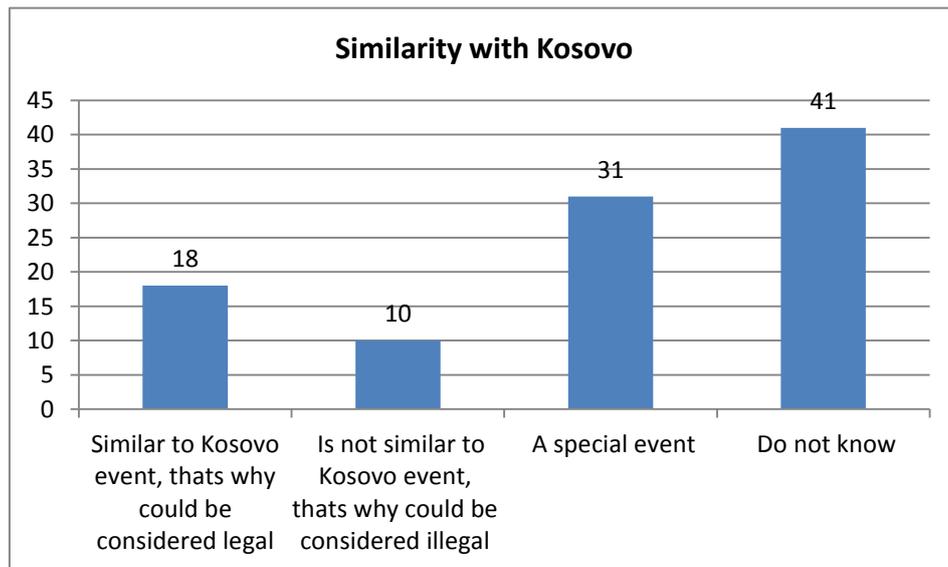
Graph #7



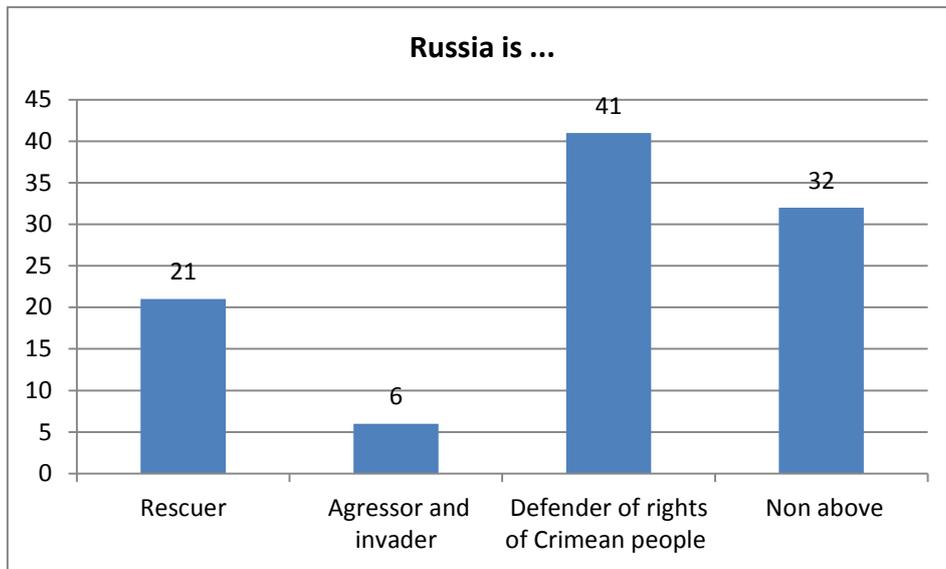
Graph #8



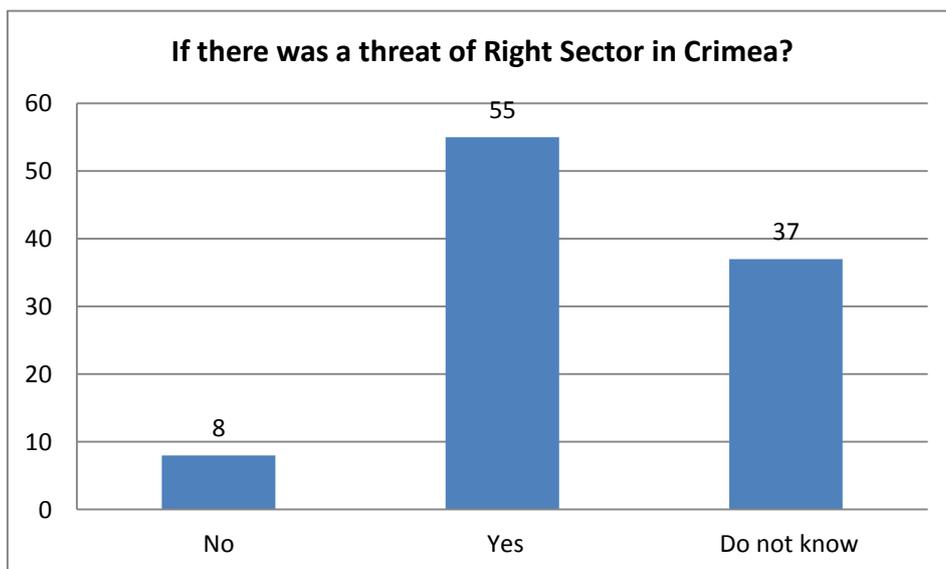
Graph #9



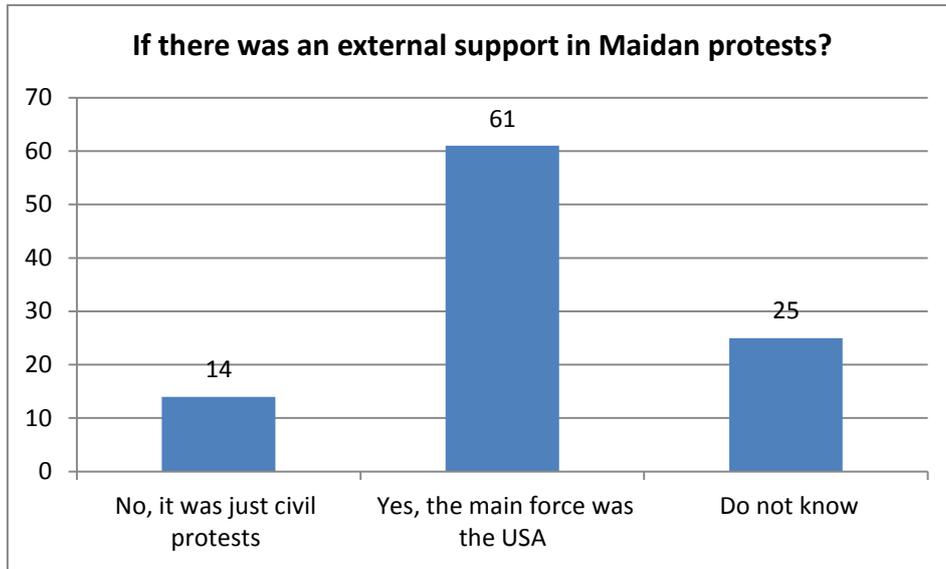
Graph #10.



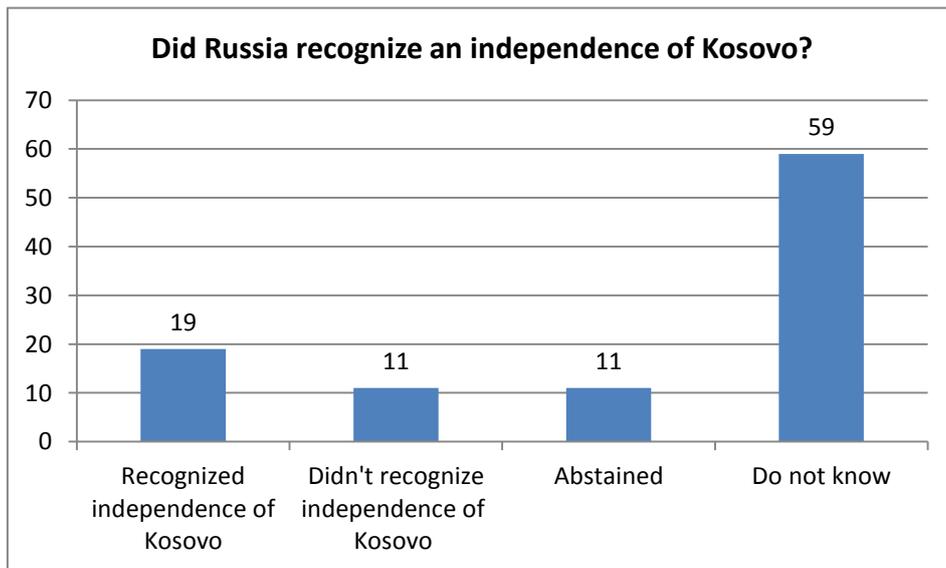
Graph #11



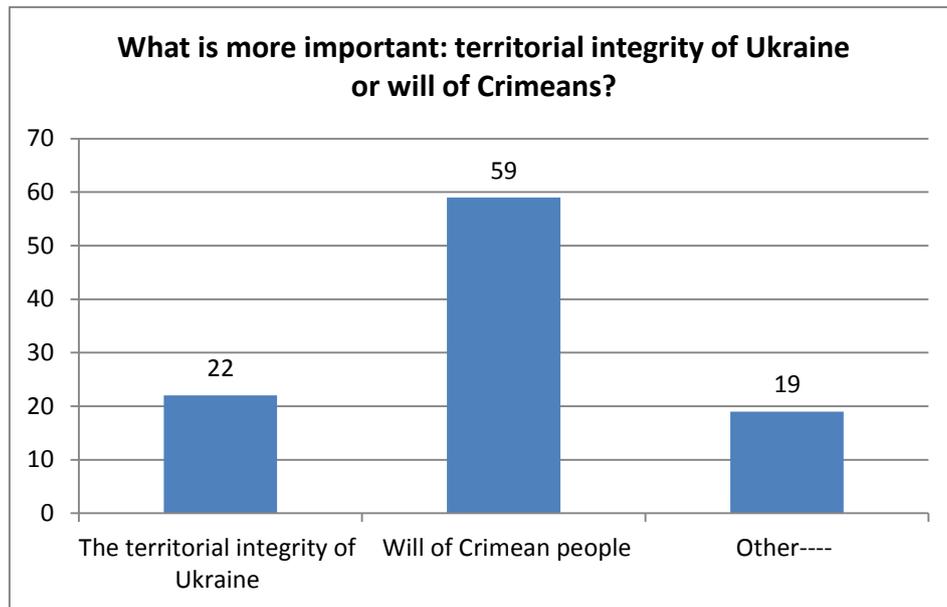
Graph #12



Graph #13



Graph #14



## Literature

Entman, R.M. "Framing: Toward Clarification of a fractured paradigm." *Journal of Communication*, 1993: 51-58.

Gamson, William A., David Croteau, William Hoynes, and Theodore Sasson. "Media Images and the Social Construction of Reality." *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 18., 1992: 373-393.

Gamson, William A., Modigliani, Andre. "'Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power: A Constructionist Approach'." *The American Journal of Sociology*, 1989: 95.

<http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/25307754.html>. n.d.

Johnson-Cartee, Karen S. *News Narratives and News Framing*. Maryland: Rowman&Littlefield Publishers, 2005.

Kuharchuk, D. B. *Sotsiologiya*. Moskova: Urait, 2006.

Reese, Stephen D. "The Framing Project: A Bridging Model for Media Research Revisited." *Journal of Communication*, 2007: 151-152.

Smith, S. *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Tankard, J. "The empirical approach to the study of media framing ." *Framing public life*, 2001: 95-106.