Biased Media and Foreign Policy Preferences

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Abstract

This paper examines if availability of Russian analog television affected the outcome of the EU membership referendum held in Latvia in 2003. For identification, I use as-if at random variation of Russian TV signal strength in Latvian regions by the Russian border. The analysis of the electoral data demonstrated that overall Russian television was counter-effective to alter Latvians' foreign policy preferences: In areas with the best Russian television reception, votes for joining the European Union significantly outperformed votes against the union. However, the effect was pronounced in municipalities densely populated with ethnic Russians. These findings contribute to the identification of limits of foreign media influence during political events susceptible to information manipulations and on-set public opinion formation.

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If the foreign policy interests of two neighbouring countries diverge, one of the states, if not democratic, might find profitable to alter voters' foreign policy preferences in its "defecting" neighbor. For example, the nondemocratic state can deploy its soft power by administrating a propaganda campaign (Elshehawy et al. 2019). Assuming this strategic behavior, can controlled by an authoritarian government media influence voters' behavior in a foreign state? This article answers this question by estimating the effect of Russian television on foreign policy preferences in a neighbouring democratic state.

From the literature it is known that cross-national media effects exist: Exposure to German television increased voter turnout in Switzerland (Butler and De La O 2011); Serbian radio induced nationalist behaviour among living in the bordering regions Croatians (DellaVigna et al. 2014). Studies of the impact of Western media on public opinion in authoritarian regimes like East Germany and China, demonstrated the reversed effect due to realistic coverage of socioeconomic issues in the West (Kern and Hainmueller 2009; Kern 2011; Huang and Yeh 2017; Lu et al. 2014). However, with the important exception of Peisakhin and Rozenas (2018), the question of what are the effects of the media controlled by a nondemocratic state abroad remains understudied. Cases such as Al Jazeera in the Arab World, Russian news outlets (RT, Sputnik etc.) in European Union countries, and the China Central Television in Africa are still to be explored.[2,3] The major obstacle is that the causal effect of the biased media on politics is complicated to ascertain due to an endogeneity problem. This article attempts to address this issue through identification of *as-if at random* variation of the key explanatory variable. In particular, this study exploits exogenous variation in availability of Russian television signal to border regions of a Baltic state Latvia during the European Union membership referendum in 2003.

Despite the fact that Russian television influenced Latvian population unintentionally, the case presents an excellent setting for studying the corresponding research question for several reasons. First, half of the population in Latvian municipalities that are

[2] "A Powerful Russian Weapon: The Spread of False Stories," New York Times, 29 August 2016.

[3] "German media worries about Russian-led disinformation campaign," DW, 19 February 2016.

close to Russian border are native Russians.[4] They primarily voted against joining the European Union despite signaled benefits for the Russian community from entering the union (Pridham 2003). Second, the evidence does not demonstrate strategic behavior of ethnic Russians that could signify economic or cultural advantages from living close to the border.[5] Third, major news shows on Russian national television turned towards unfavorable coverage of Western politics after Vladimir Putin came to power in 1999, which is before the EU referendum in Latvia. Finally, many voters were prone to shape their policy impressions specifically during referendum campaigns (Leduc 2002). Thus, the role of any additional information, internal as well as external, is crucial for referendum outcomes.

BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS

During the referendum campaign in Latvia, national polls reported that the public was mostly supporting the European Union (Pridham 2003). However, a substantial part of the Latvia close to the Russian border populated by ethnic Russians voted against joining the union. Survey evidence shows that ethnic Russians and Latvians seem had similar attitudes towards LGBT minorities and civil liberties, the same level of trust in the government and press before the referendum. Attitudes towards international organizations such as the EU and NATO, however, are sharply polarized. Although the mapped data of referendum results seems dependent on the share of Russian speakers across municipalities, I posit that exposure to Russian television was one of the the factors why Latvians' and Russians' foreign policy preferences diverge. [6]

Russian TV channels devoted to the European Union and Latvian politics in 2003 substantial coverage. Importantly that by 2000 the Russian national television was captured by the state. Television broadcasting in Russia was described in the literature as

[4]See Background section in the appendix. All appendices are available online.

[5]"Role of Russia in foreign trade of Latvia," Lettia.lv, 11 September 2009; OECD (2013)

[6]Television was and still is the most popular source of information in Latvia (Eurobarometer, 2014).

a monopoly of the state and its deferential oligarchs (Colton and McFaul 2006, 217).[7] This allows for an assumption of Russian state television being impartial in reports about Western politics in 2003. However, since media consumption is voluntary, the public could ignore propaganda messages or consume entertaining content only (Durante and Knight 2012; Kern and Hainmueller 2009). Another potential mechanism is that the audience could observe propaganda but was able to identify facts (Truex 2016). This, however, also would not lead to the outcome expected by the sender. Furthermore, the effects of the biased media might be restricted once the audience has strong predispositions (Zaller 1992). For example, Adena et al. (2015) showed that the Nazis established anti-Semitic propaganda was counter-effective in the regions, where anti-Semitism was historically low. Peisakhin and Rozenas (2018) also demonstrated that recipients with divergent views will reject biased messages, which would lead to the reversed effect. Thus, empirical evidence suggests that the biased media can affect individuals' political behavior by appealing to motivated reasoning (Geddes and Zaller 1989; Kunda 1990).

In the context of this study, the role of the biased media might be important because of its conviction power during a political campaign. The empirical evidence shows that vote alteration under the influence of the media is an intricate process that is either negligible or hardly observable (Enikolopov et al. 2011; Gerber et al. 2011; Stroemberg 2015). Nonetheless, in the case of Latvia, biased media effects might be more pronounced because the referendum touched upon a relatively new policy, towards which the public did not yet have entrenched preferences. In addition, previous studies demonstrated that the effect of "foreign voices" depends heavily on the reputation of a sender. This implies that the public might respond positively to the criticism from a highly esteemed sender, but oppose to the one, who is not credible as a news source (Hayes and Guardino 2011; Marinov 2016). Another possible mechanism is a spillover effect that is implying assisted by a media dissemination of particular action from one group of individuals to another (Yanagizawa-Drott 2014).

[7] Russia was 148th in the Reporters without Borders ranking of press freedom in 2003, down from the 121st place in 2002.

This scholarly debate leads to the following expectation: the biased coverage of the Western politics by Russian television contributed into policy preferences formation among Latvian citizens, who had Russian TV reception. The effect of exposure to Russian TV will be potent among Russians than ethnic Latvians. In fact, the impact on Latvians might be reversed since they may consume solely entertainment content (Meloni et al. 2019). The effect on Russians will be stronger due to the reputation of a broadcaster or historical sentiments that are absent among Latvians.

EMPIRICS

The data includes municipalities that are located within 150 km from Russia, which is 226 observations in total. The data for the outcome variable, the share of votes for joining the European Union in every precinct, is available from the Central Election Commission of Latvia. One municipality contains one precinct. The data for precincts in towns is averaged. To estimate the signal strength of Russian analog TV in every precinct, I use Irregular Terrain Model (or the Longley-Rice model).[8] The model takes into account the power and the frequency of the transmitters, the height above ground and geographical coordinates of the towers, elevation data and the signal path loss. The data on parameters of Russian TV transmitters and towers is available from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).[9] There were four Russian analog TV towers along the Latvian-Russian border in 2003. I only use the signal evaluation for a tower with the most powerful transmitter as it covers the largest territory of Latvia. This gives 70 percent of the precincts with good reception of Russian television.

[8]Anita Longley and Phil Rice from Central Radio Propagation Laboratory in Boulder, Colorado developed a model for point-to-point link predictions for the US Department of Commerce in 1968. I used a report on the model by Hufford et al. (1982)

[9]ITU data does not provide information about the type of channels that transmitters broadcast, which may be entertainment channels, news channels or both. I rely on evidence from Peisakhin and Rozenas (2018), which asserts that the primary most potent transmitters usually belong to TV channels such as Channel 1 or Rossiya, the most popular ones in Russia.

Research design

The availability of Russian TV is quasi-random if it does not correlate with all possible observables (Sekhon and Titiunik 2012). I report the results of independence tests in the appendix. Overall, most social-demographic and economic covariates do not correlate with the TV signal strength. I also control for the results from a referendum on a parliamentary law in Latvia in 1998. The result does not show significant relation with the signal, which implies that even though Russian TV was available in the 1990s, it did not affect voters' attitudes before the EU referendum but might impact voters' preferences specifically in the context of international politics.

Because of relative flat terrain of the Latvian land, the signal strength correlates with the distance to Russia, which points out that, in 2003, Russian TV might have been mostly available to citizens that are living close to Russia. This jeopardizes the assumption about the "independence" of Russian TV signal therefore I control for the distance in the primary regression model. The signal strength also negatively correlates with the percentage of ethnic Russians in a municipality, which means that most of ethnic Russians in East Latvia live close to the border. This issue is addressed in the analysis.

Importantly that this study utilises "encouragement design" which implies the availability of the treatment but does not necessary mean the compliance with it.[10] Thus, the signal strength is a measure of the access to Russian television, rather than the actual consumption. Due to the historical context of the study, the news consumption in East Latvia on individual level cannot be identified systematically. However, previous studies demonstrate a high correlation between these observables (DellaVigna et al. 2014; Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018).

[10]Difference-in-difference research design would be the most desirable for this study. However, fine grained individual-level data in Latvian border regions before and after the EU referendum is not available.

Table 1: Precinct-level regression results. Dependent variables are vote-percentages for joining the European Union. All specifications control for smoothing splines for distance to Russia.

	Vote for the EU		Turnout	
	Baseline	Full	Baseline	Full
Russian TV reception quality	0.45***	0.22***	0.16*	0.05
	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.08)	(0.07)
Percent of Russian speakers		-0.55***		-0.16**
		(0.04)		(0.06)
Pro-Russian vote in 1998		-0.45***		-0.20*
		(0.07)		(0.09)
Rural precinct		-0.03*		0.08
		(0.02)		(0.05)
Close to highways		-0.01		-0.02
		(0.02)		(0.03)
Adjusted R^2	0.16	0.81	0.02	0.15
Observations	220	220	220	220

Standard errors are in parentheses; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001.

Control variables

There are five groups of covariates in the model: topography, economy, social-demography, political context, and historical background. Topographic features include dummies for railways, and main roads. Demographic controls include the population, the population aged over 60 (older generation might still have ties to post-Soviet Russia as well as nostalgia about the life in the Soviet Union), education, ethnic groups (percentage of ethnic Latvians, and Russians). I also include Ukrainian and Belarusian population into Russian ethnic group since both speak Russian and could be exposed to Russian television. Social-economic variables are the unemployment rate (the region of interest has the highest unemployment rate) and percentage of the working-age population. A dummy for the location of large Soviet factories and enterprises serves as a control for the historical background. This variable controls for the effect of losing jobs due to the closure of main enterprises in the region after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. I also include a dummy for villages because the television consumption tends to be higher in rural areas.The data is available from the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. The source for topographic

Table 2: Robustness checks: regression coefficients for Russian TV reception. All specifications include the full set of covariates.

	Vote for the EU		Turnout		
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Obs.
1. Distance to Russia < 50 km	0.25^{**}	(0.08)	0.09	(0.10)	92
2. Distance to Russia > 25 km	0.20^{***}	(0.05)	0.07	(0.09)	171
3. TV reception quality $\in (0.2, 0.8)$	0.17^{**}	(0.05)	0.14	(0.09)	177
4. Only villages	0.22^{***}	(0.06)	0.08	(0.07)	199
5. Only towns and cities	-0.51^{***}	(0.07)	-1.43^{***}	(0.33)	20
6. Only Daugavpils district	-0.48	(0.32)	0.13	(0.43)	26
7. Without Daugavpils district	0.24^{***}	(0.06)	0.05	(0.07)	193
8. Control for ≥ 60 years olds (%)	0.20^{***}	(0.06)	0.08	(0.07)	219
9. Control for unemployment rate	0.18^{***}	(0.05)	0.06	(0.07)	219
10. $\geq 60\%$ Russian speakers	0.05^{***}	(0.00)	0.55^{***}	(0.00)	13
11. $\leq 60\%$ Russian speakers	0.18^{**}	(0.06)	0.05	(0.08)	206
12. Control for population N (log)	0.21^{***}	(0.05)	0.08	(0.06)	219
13. Population with higher education (%)	0.21^{***}	(0.05)	0.05	(0.07)	219

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001.

variables is Google Maps. Summary statistics are in the appendix.

Results

To estimate the effect of Russian TV signal quality on pro-EU vote during the European Union membership referendum in Latvia in 2003, I used semiparametric OLS regression. Table 1 and Table 2 report main results and robustness checks respectively. The coefficient for Russian TV signal is significant at the 95 percent confidence level and positive, suggesting that availability of Russian TV was counter-effective to make an average Latvian citizen to vote against the state joining the European Union.The effect is consistent with the literature, where propaganda induces a backfire if the message does not match recipients' predispositions.

Further, I explore the heterogeneity in the voters' behavior. I estimate the effect of Russian TV across Latvian and Russian ethnic groups. The divergence of the effect for ethnic groups is observable from Figure 1. The effect of Russian TV on pro-EU vote decreases with the increase of Russian speakers in a county. I report robustness checks in the appendix. In general, the interaction effect is dependent upon model specification,

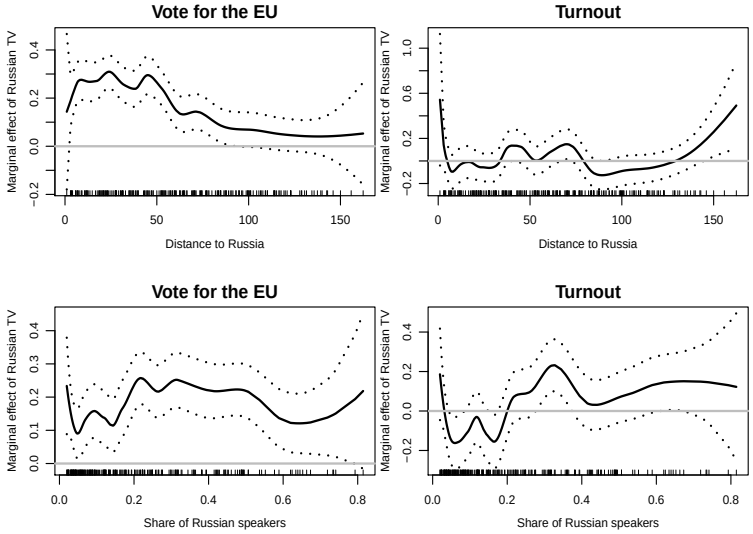

Figure 1: Conditional heterogeneity of the Russian television reception effect. KRLS-Based Heterogeneity Estimates

which might be due to a small number of observations. Individual-level data could help to tackle this issue. Nevertheless, despite being inconsistent and dependent on sampling, ethnic groups have a sizeable explanatory power in the effect of Russian TV on vote for joining the European Union.

CONCLUSION

This article aimed to address the question of whether biased foreign media administrated by an authoritarian state can affect political behavior in a democratic country. The analysis demonstrated that the availability of Russian television influences foreign policy preferences in the opposite direction of the foreign state interest: the Latvian population tends to contradict biased foreign messages, while the Russian population tends to repudiate the Western policies under the influence of Russian television. The main conclusion is that the foreign authoritarian media is most likely to affect policy preferences in a democracy if the sender is credible to the audience, and least likely to persuade those, who have neutral or even negative experience with the sender. The implication of the results in this study touches upon the ongoing debate about perspectives of a foreign state to alter citizens' electoral behavior in a democratic state by strategic dissemination of propaganda. Overall, the biased foreign media is limited to historical sentiments of

the voters. However, it might keep ethnic minorities isolated and disintegrated.

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