

The Image of the European Union in Russian Media

RUSSIAN PERCEPTION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Russian parliamentary elections in 2011 as well as the presidential elections in 2012 and the surrounding protests have been extraordinary political events that claimed the attention of Russian society for months. Indeed, one might expect that media and people do not care about foreign policy issues under the impression of such events; yet, this is only true to a certain extent. Most notably, the U.S. Department of State grew a full-fledged player in media coverage on the Duma elections. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin publicly accused it of supporting and financing protests, intervening into Russian sovereign business.¹ This issue became widely discussed in Russian television and press. Furthermore, the *European Parliament (EP)* and the *European Union (EU)* High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy voiced objections regarding fairness of the elections, the European Parliament even called for new parliamentary elections. This paper deals with the perception of the EU in the Russian media sphere during the two subsequent election campaigns; furthermore, it elaborates on the importance of the EU in Russian media and the demand thereof.

To this end, both quantitative and qualitative methods are applied in this research; the formal analysis of the EU-related media coverage is carried out by using two main sources: These are the *Yandex.news* aggregator and the Russian press database *Integrum*. The quantitative analysis investigates the frequency of the words *Европейский союз* (European Union) and *Евросоюз* (shorter version for European Union) in printed and online media on a daily basis. Change in frequency in due consideration of significant events that happened in the European Union during research time allows one to study what kind of EU-related events have generated high response rates in Russian media. The timeline examined is the period between November 5th 2011 and March 31st 2012. Thus, the timeline includes the parliamentary and presidential elections as well the Duma election campaign that was officially launched on November 5th, 2011.¹ March 31st is chosen to mark one month past the March 4th presidential elections. The qualitative part describes the most influential Russian daily and weekly press - regarding size and quality - in order pick up op-eds attitudes vis-à-vis EU related issues.

¹ 5th November marks the time competing parties were allowed to use the TV and mass media influence toolbox for self-cavassing to their full extent.

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Among the key events during the research is the second Greek bailout procedure to write-off 50% part of national debt and to stimulate the economy with more financial transactions on February 21st, 2012. These events are linked to the Papandreou government resignation on November 10th 2011 after the confusion regarding a possible referendum on the austerity measures imposed on Greece by the EU. Six days later, the Italian government resigned under, the Spanish government followed in late December, both due to economic and political pressure.

Despite substantial domestic crisis, the EU still dealt with foreign policy issues: In late 2011 and early 2012, EU adopted several sanctions against Syria and Iran. In late February, measures were applied against Minsk. These measures inflamed open conflict between Brussels, the Member States, and Belarus; eventually, EU Member State ambassadors left Minsk days later. In February, economic sanctions were imposed on Hungary for breaching the budget deficit threshold; in fact, these measures by the EU executive are often interpreted as forcing the Hungarian government to amend the newly adopted Constitution and some legislative acts. According to the *European Commission (EC)* they violate fundamental freedoms and principles of the EU.

The signing of the Fiscal Compact in Brussels on March 2nd marked a turning point in the *European Monetary Union (EMU)*. Two weeks later the concept of a *financial transaction tax (FTT)* was discussed on EU-level and strongly advocated by then French President Sarkozy. However, the British government made very clear that it was going to do everything to protect the City from proposed FTT.

On November 8th the North Stream pipeline became operational and marked successful infrastructure cooperation in Russian-European relations. But yet again, resolutions regarding the Russian parliamentary and presidential elections by the *European Parliament (EP)* in mid-December and mid-March brought about mutual alienation.

This brief outline illustrates that in the current economic crisis the EU prioritizes domestic policy issues and might be reluctant towards engaging in foreign policy issues at all; however, the cases of Belarus, Iran, and Syria as well as the aforementioned resolutions underlines that the EU did not completely withdraw from foreign policy and was rather active on the international level. Due to internal policy issues and very few Russian-European encounters that took place in the research period, one might expect Russian media to rarely publish EU-related articles. This hypothesis is to be examined in the analysis.

Quantitative analysis**European Union in the *Yandex.news* aggregator: methodology and results**

Chart 1 is a graphic representation of the data extracted from the *Yandex.news* aggregator. It describes the gathered data of the total number of news published in any form and aggregated via the *Yandex.news* web-crawling service. Put simply, the indicator demonstrates the absolute number of messages that mention *Европейский союз* and *Евросоюз* - in all their cases and forms - accumulated by the online aggregator during the research period. The collected data allows assessing which of the aforementioned events generated the highest response rate in Russian online and printed press on a daily basis. Only these two terms are used, other terms and abbreviations such as EC (EU) generate too much informational noise. Furthermore, the Chart is cleared from seasonal - weekly - oscillations for the total number of news published during weekends is significantly lower

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that during workdays. A brief review of main differences between absolute (dark line) and relative (grey line) amounts of the EU-related news need to be made.

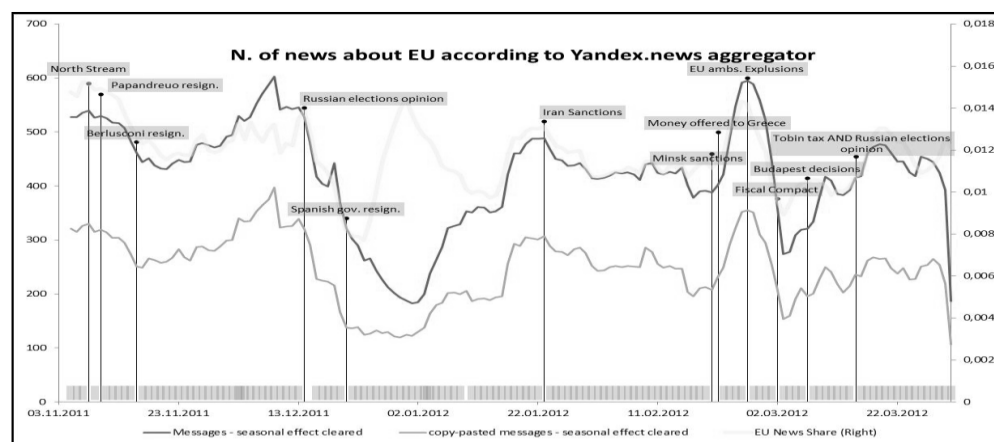


Chart 1: Number of news about EU according to Yandex.news aggregator

The absolute scale illustrates the total amount of published news that mention the prospective terms, whereas the relative scale displays the share of EU-related messages among all news items on that day. In the chart they strongly correlate with a correlation coefficient of 0.85 for seasonally non-adjusted and 0.81 for adjusted data; however, there are two important exceptions:

The first exception is a sharp increase in journalistic activity during the protests from December 5th to December 14th; the absolute amount of the EU references jumped high, while the relative significance of EU-related messages did not increase. With the euphoria cooling down and New Year and Christmas approaching, the absolute number of EU mentioning dropped. However, there is one important leap in the relative numbers in mid-December that can easily be explained with the EP resolution regarding the parliamentary elections. The second outlier result is New Year's eve with a drastic drop in any kind of news reported till the end of the Christmas holidays on January 10th and a relative outburst of EU references during this period. One explanation is rather apolitical: Traditionally, the numbers of tourist-related news – EU Member States being a major destination – grow during this period.

In November, the operational start of North Stream pipeline generated a tangible reaction in Russian media, whereas several internal EU-issues such as the resignation of the Greek and Italian governments as well as the change of government in Spain did not cause a similar response in Russian press. In December, a large and sharp growth in EU-related news resulted from the EP resolution on the unfair nature of the parliamentary elections. This increase reflects a peak in the relative share of the total amount of news. The total number of news began slipping to its lowest level during Christmas holidays. Russian media quantitatively reflected EU Member States' sanctions vis-à-vis Iran and the European media debate on the security of European oil supplies. Yet, the remarkable peak in the end of January is likely to be a reaction EU sanctions vis-à-vis Syria that is perceived as an important partner of and by the Russian government; in fact, Russian journalists interpret the aforementioned as a latent threat to Kremlin itself. Diplomatic disruptions between EU and Belarus led to another surge of EU-related reports, whereas internal events remained generally unnoticed. The last wave of EU-related news in the end of March can be explained by the EP resolution on the outcome of the Russian presidential elections; despite the meek character of this document, journalistic interest went from a modest surge to oblivion rather swiftly.

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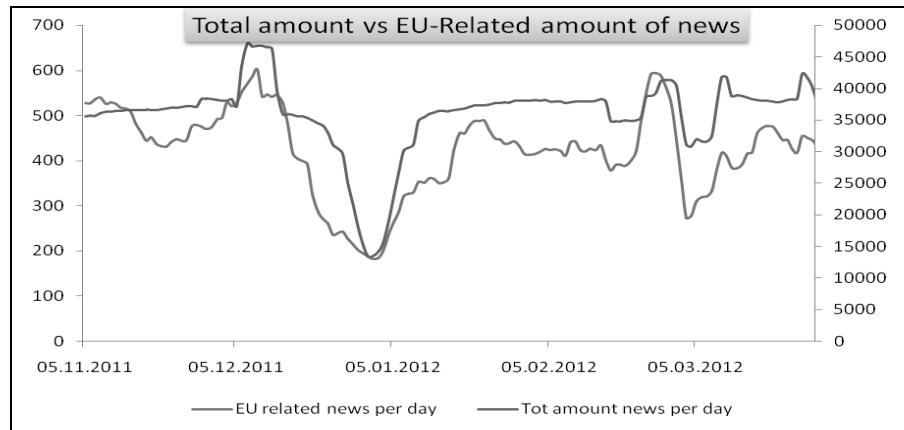


Chart 2: Total amount vs. EU-related amount of news

The statistics provided by *Yandex.news* further allow assessing the share of EU-related newspaper articles among the total number of news reports mentioning the EU as displayed in Chart 3. Although following trends of the general news stream illustrated in Chart 2, the number of articles in printed media do not exceed one-fourth of the total amount of news. Among these articles mentioning the EU about one-third are so-called copy-and-paste articles: Especially Russian regional press reprints federal press articles in order to cut editorial costs.

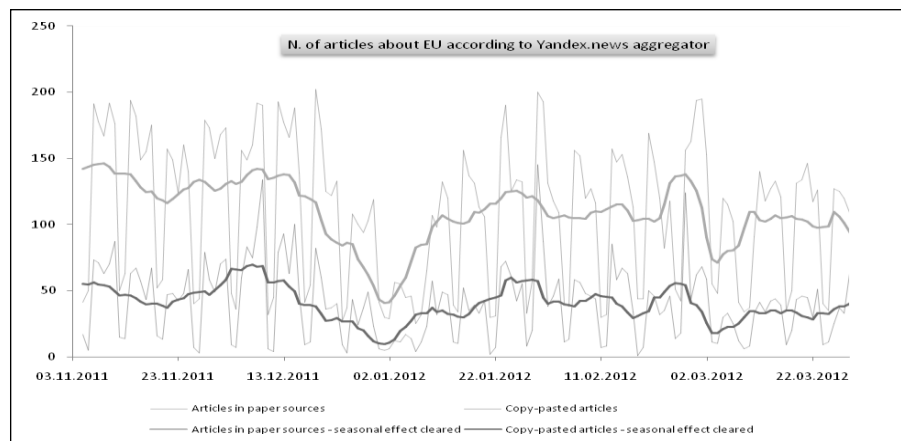


Chart 3: Number of articles about EU according to Yandex.news aggregator

The *Yandex.news* analysis illustrates that the North Stream operational start as well as EP resolutions have provoked a surge in Russian media; yet, EU-Belarus diplomatic disruptions has also attracted a lot of media attention although it is not a genuine Russian political issue.

European Union in the Integrum database: methodology and results

Compared to automated web-based news aggregators such as *Yandex.news* the professional media database *Integrum* has some shortcomings, but several significant advantages at the same time. Its scope is limited; moreover, its adjustment ability towards transformations in the Russian media landscape is limited due to the rapid nature of such change and transformation. However, the database's design allows for more substantial semantic analysis as well as a distinction of newspaper sources into federal and regional ones. Chart 4 illustrates this distinction regarding EU-related articles by months. Again keywords like *Европейский союз* and *Евросоюз* in all their cases and forms are used.

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Generally speaking, the trends observed analysing *Integrum* coincide with those observed in *Yandex.news* with peaks of interest in November – North Stream - and December – EP resolution – as well as the tangible downward slope after. Over-centralization of both financial and informational resources is reflected in the share of regional press interested in EU issues; it does not exceed 70 percentages of similar articles published by Moscow media.

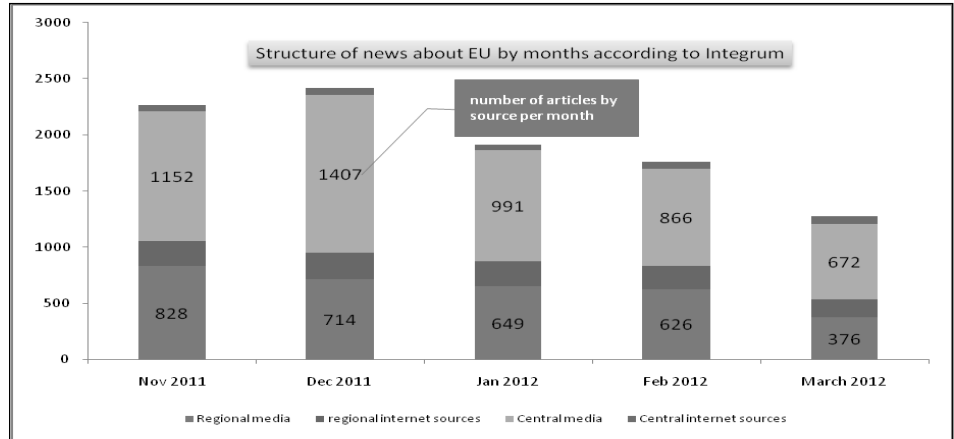


Chart 4: Structure of news about EU by months according to Integrum

The total number of articles mentioning the EU-related keywords during the research period from November 5th 2011 to March 31st 2012 is 11.888. In order to analyse them; they are divided into two big sub-categories; i.e. *EU internal issues* and *EU external issues*. Regarding the aforementioned important events during the research timeline, several sub-keywords in order to screen the articles in depth are defined: For EU internal issues these are *кризис* (crisis), *Греция* (Greece), and *распад* (disintegration/breakup/collapse); however, the latter turned out to be statistically insignificant. For EU external issues or EU-Russia-related issues *Белоруссия* (Belarus) and *газ* (gas) are used. Thirdly *Украина* (Ukraine) was searched for, which is not all that obvious. In fact, nothing important happened towards EU-Ukrainian relations; however, Ukraine is mentioned in some articles for it is often associated with gas transition towards the EU.

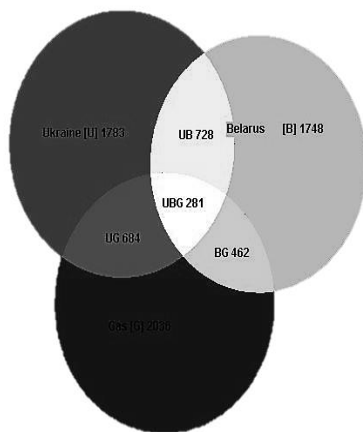


Chart 5

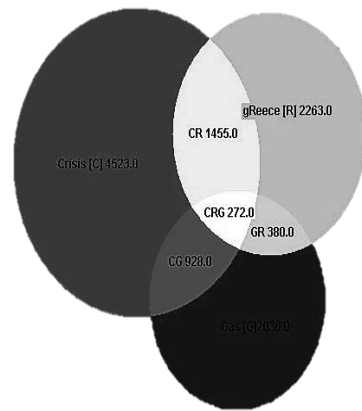


Chart 6

Processing these five keywords, 8.159 articles or 68.6 percentages contain both the EU-mentioning and one of the five sub-keywords. Statistical data illustrated in Chart 5 and 6 support the hypothesis of the hidden but important role of gas issues in any EU-related news published by Russian journalists. This issue is intertwined both with articles on EU

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relations to Russia's' neighbouring states as well as subjects that are not instantly linked with energy issues; e.g. Greece and the crisis in the Eurozone. To confirm these half-intuitive hunches regarding key EU-related issues in Russian media during the two election campaigns, the following qualitative analysis in op-eds of the Russian leading press for the aforementioned timeline is undertaken.

Qualitative analysis

This qualitative part comprehends connotations and the general discourse regarding EU-related news and therefore goes beyond quantitative indicators of word frequency in news reports and articles. To this end, eight influential daily and weekly Russian newspapers and conducted manual content analysis of op-eds on events in the European Union during the research period are selected. This demonstrates the quantitative presence of EU-related news and provides an idea of what Russian journalists and analysts think and try to share on such issues. Of the selected newspapers, four can be characterized as liberal and rather independent from the government (Table 1; violet); they are counterbalanced by four conservative and rather pro-government news items (Ibid; green). In February 2012, the selected periodicals had the following Average Issue Readership (AIR) according to TNS Global, the Russian branch of Gallup:

NEWSPAPER'S /MAGAZINE'S NAME	PUBLISHING HOUSE	FORMAT AND FREQUENCY	AIR (THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE)	AIR (%)
<i>Газета.Ru</i> (Newspaper.Ru)	<i>Издательский дом Коммерсантъ</i> (The Merchant)	Online daily newspaper	n/a ²	n/a
<i>Ведомости</i> (The Gazette)	<i>Издательский дом Independent</i> (Independent Media)	Printed daily newspaper	164.4	0.3
<i>Комсомольская правда</i> (The Komsomol Truth)	<i>Издательский дом Комсомольская правда</i> (The Komsomol Truth)	Printed daily newspaper	1627.2 ³	2.8 ⁴
<i>Аргументы и факты</i> (Arguments and Facts)	<i>Издательский дом Аргументы и факты</i> (Arguments and Facts)	Printed weekly newspaper	7694	12,7

² *Газета.Ru* is an online daily; therefore, AIR data is not applicable. However, the Unique User Number for the website invokes 6.915.539 unique entries for April.

³ Data only available until October 2009.

⁴ Data only available until October 2009.

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<i>Русский Репортер</i> (Russian Reporter)	<i>Издательский дом Группа Эксперт</i> (Expert Group)	Printed weekly magazine	418.1	0.7
<i>Эксперт</i> (The Expert)	<i>Издательский дом Группа Эксперт</i> (Expert Group)	Printed weekly magazine	404.3	0.7
<i>Коммерсантъ- Власть</i> (The Merchant- The Power)	<i>Издательский дом Коммерсантъ</i> (The Merchant)	Printed weekly magazine	444.1	0.7
<i>Коммерсантъ- Деньги</i> (The Merchant- Money)	<i>Издательский дом Коммерсантъ</i> (The Merchant)	Printed weekly magazine	258.8	0.4

Table 1

The chosen periodicals are rather well-read and therefore quite influential among the Russian audience. Moreover, the article-by-article analysis of these newspapers and magazines illustrates that the op-eds topics closely follow the trend observed in the quantitative part of the research. However, there is one important exception regarding the EP resolutions on the two Russian elections. Despite the December resolution having provoked a surge of news reports, there are almost no op-eds reporting on the issue. In general, Russian journalists seem to perceive the EU as an economic giant and important trading partner, but consider it a political pygmy. Therefore, they do not pay attention to its political jabs at the Kremlin.

Other than that, the main issues discussed are the economic crisis, Greek troubles, the EU-Russia gas disputes, the EU-Belarus diplomatic disruptions and EU-Ukraine-Russia relations. Little attention is paid to the newly adopted Hungarian Constitution and to sanctions against Iran.

EU internal issues

For Russian op-eds and the audience of aforementioned newspapers and magazines the major concern regarding the EU appears to be the internal economic turmoil and its effects on the Russian economy itself. Former Deputy Head of the Russian Central Bank, Sergey Alexashenko, commented the significance of the Euro-Crisis in the quality daily *Ведомости/ The Gazette*:

It seems that the European leaders have reached the point of taking the most radical decisions, which only yesterday seemed absolutely unimaginable, and let's hope, these decisions would adequately meet the problems they are intended to solve. Because you know, the stability of the global financial

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system is now directly dependent on what, how and when is done in the EU. But being glad for Europe's sake, I want to ask whether the Russian leaders do understand the whole scale of the economic problems they are now going to be faced with?⁵

However, not just high-quality newspapers and magazines such as *Ведомости/The Gazette* or *Коммерсантъ-Власть/The Merchant-The Power* that cover issues of interdependencies between the European crisis and the Russian economy; e.g. they covered the debate on the so-called Tobin-tax as well as its effects on Russia broadly. Moreover, the pro-governmental daily *Комсомольская правда/The Komsomol Truth* also published several items on the Eurozone and the Greek crisis that can all be summed up by the following quotation:

But what do we have to do with this Greek epopee? We as is the world are vitally interested in the Greek economy recovery. The link is direct, if Athens feels fine, then it will be easier to tackle the European economic crisis which in turn, influences the state of the global economy, and of ours as well.⁶

Remarkably, the perception of political leadership in the EU financial crisis is rather negative: For instance, when former Greek Prime Minister Papandreou called for a referendum and German Chancellor Angela Merkel as well as others exercised severe pressure, pro-governmental weekly *Эксперт/The Expert* openly called it a tragicomedy and European hypocrisy.⁷ Furthermore, it sceptically published on EU's impact on the resignations of Papandreou and Berlusconi:

I talk about the EU authorities that with the ingenuousness that seems even touching has embraced the Brezhnev Doctrine about the limited sovereignty of the brotherly socialist countries.⁸

They also apply indirect references of *Soviet Union* to a possible collapse of the Eurozone and the European Union in general; in fact, Russian media compared to European ones are much more dramatic regarding the crisis: Rather yellowish weekly newspaper *Аргументы и факты/Arguments and Facts* "considers the collapse of the Euro, the EU and Europe a real possibility."⁹

To sum up, the majority of the analysed op-eds are rather objective, neutral and professional in their economic reporting and analyses; however, pro-governmental and yellowish press – especially some authors *Эксперт* and *Аргументы и факты* - are more negative, dramatic and unprofessional compared to quality daily and weekly print and online newspapers and magazines.

EU external issues

The two most important events in EU-Russian relations in the research timeline are the operational launch of the North Stream gas pipeline and two EP resolutions on the parliamentary and presidential elections. The latter has hardly gained any attention from op-eds of the eight influential newspapers and magazines. In fact, one exception is the assessment by *Коммерсантъ-Власть* that not only the US administration has criticised the

⁵ *The crisis gives hope*, December 5th, 2011.

⁶ *Athens on fire again*, February 13th, 2012.

⁷ *The birth of farce from the debt crisis*, November 7th, 2011.

⁸ *It is cold in Europe, and dark in Italy*, November 21st, 2011.

⁹ *One euro for 15 rubles? What is to happen with the international economy after the Greek default?*, February 8th, 2012..

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Duma elections in 2011.¹⁰ Despite North Stream, we have come across two further issues that are rather indirectly linked to EU-Russian relations: The diplomatic dispute between Minsk and Brussels as well as Ukraine and its role in gas transition; gas plays a tremendous role in general.

Online daily *Газета.Ru* analysed the deadlock that always occurs in late December when Moscow and Kiev negotiated gas prices: Russia is reluctant to accept Kiev's proposals for the Russian national interest is "to execute the political control over the Ukrainian gas-transport system. For the Kremlin Ukraine is, first and foremost, a transit territory, that is the reason why the Kremlin's key interest is to secure its rights over the transit"¹¹ to its main consumer. These geopolitical and economic considerations surface in articles devoted to the twentieth anniversary of Ukrainian independence: An Ukrainian author discussing the latest developments in EU-Ukrainian relations warns that the *Association Agreement* might be harmed if authorities do not stop repressions against former Prime Minister Julia Timoshenko and sell Ukrainian pipelines to *Gazprom*.¹² In the context of the North Stream launch, Ukraine played a role in op-eds as well: Moscow celebrated the pipeline project as a victory over untrustworthy Kyiv and its transit policy. However, the quality *Коммерсантъ-Власть* is sceptical and illustrates that Russia is not able to supply enough gas to its European partners without Ukraine. That goes for a short-term as well as medium-term perspective.¹³

Debate on Belarus was rather ambiguous during the two election campaigns, especially after the diplomatic disruptions with the EU. On the one hand, both pro-governmental and liberal press emphasizes the principles expressed by the EU in its measures against Minsk, but on the other hand, they characterized these measures as insufficient or even half-hearted and insincere. Such dualism can be found in op-eds of weekly newspaper *Аргументы и факты*:

The Russian government representatives have already stressed that the sanctions against Belarus are destructive [...]; nevertheless, Europe keeps adhering to its principles in the dispute with Minsk. According to some political analysts no economic deterioration of the relations will follow since the EU Member States will continue to buy cheap and high-quality petrochemicals from Belarus.¹⁴

Describing EU-Belarusian tensions the liberal press appeals less to economic reasoning, but rather more to the *clash of civilizations* argument. In fact, in a comment on the EU decision to recall its ambassadors and the further aggravation of the conflict that followed the execution of two alleged terrorists in Belarus, *Газета.Ru* notes:

Now Russia can see how politically monstrous the regime of its closest ally and neighbour is: for a country located in Europe such behaviour, in terms of basic values of European civilization, seems unthinkable". But even here the economic argument still plays its role: "the political costs of the alliance with the present Belorussian authorities can prove too expensive, even on conditions that in exchange for support, the Kremlin will be able to force

¹⁰ *The year of the great overload*, December 19th, 2011.

¹¹ *Gas stare-down*, December 21st, 2011.

¹² *Pluralism against authoritarianism*, December 13th, 2011.

¹³ *Do not promise to give up using the Ukraine pipeline*, November 14th, 2011.

¹⁴ *Having to stick up for Lukashenko. Moscow and Astana defend Minsk from the EU*, March 11th, 2012.

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Lukashenko, put into international isolation, to make some serious economic concessions.¹⁵

To sum up, one can assess that when it comes to gas issues and the relations between the EU and Russia 's closest neighbours, geopolitical and geo-economic considerations dominate the Russian media discourse vis-a-vis the EU.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the undiversified resource-based income of both the Russian economy and the federal budget remains the major generator of interest towards the European Union; thus, many EU-related news reports address in an either explicit or implicit manner. Russian media is interested in the issues of gas income and buyer reliability. Therefore, they have a genuine concern regarding the Euro-Crisis and Greek economic troubles. Moreover, this explains why the Russian press responds very sensitively to any news in EU relations with Ukraine and Belarus.

Despite this focus on gas issues, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its traumatizing aftermath is an additional factor in Russian media that is not to be underestimated, especially regarding choice of topics and connotations. Bad news from Greece are often and persistently described as the beginning of an EU breakup. In fact, the Russian media discourse is much more dramatic than the European one. This is partly due to bitter memories of the past and partly due to the malicious joy regarding another large super-entity - in public opinion EU and SU are quite comparable - being in economic troubles and facing potential collapse.

Eventually, the elections have not changed the Russian media perception of the EU; contrary to what happened to the media discourse regarding the US during the election campaigns. EU political statements and its attempts to act as a full-fledged international player have attracted little attention of Russian journalists; they barely reported on the resolutions, but never analysed them or took them for serious.

¹⁵ *Execution is no obstacle for friendship*, March 19th, 2012.

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Selected op-eds

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