



Framing the Ukraine crisis: A comparison between talk show debates in Russian and German television

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Abstract

This article examines the framing of the Ukraine crisis in German and Russian television political talk shows. Informed by peace journalism and constructive journalism, it investigates how Russian and German shows frame the Ukraine crisis and to what extent constructive and destructive frames are used. Qualitative content analysis of 20 shows (10 Russian and 10 German) enables examination of frame content and their constructive or destructive character. While constructive frames address situational causal interpretations and constructive problem treatments, destructive frames blame one party for the crisis and apply either no treatment or a destructive one. Findings reveal that

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shows in both countries provide different frames on both the situation inside Ukraine and international tensions between Russia and the West. While large parts of both strands of the debates are destructive in character, the country's shows include more constructive frames in different periods of the crisis.

Keywords

Constructive journalism, framing, Germany, indexing, peace journalism, qualitative content analysis, Russia, talk show, Ukraine crisis

Crisis talks in Russia and Germany: The framing of the Ukraine crisis on political talk show debates

The Ukraine crisis is an ongoing conflict both inside the Ukraine and in international relations between Russia and the West, defined as the United States (US), the Western European key countries, Germany, the United Kingdom (UK) and France, as well as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU) alliances, which are primarily Western but have expanded since 1999 into the former Soviet space. The crisis can be broadly divided into three time periods (for an overview, see Petro, 2017; Roman et al., 2017; Smith, 2016: 129–130). It started with protests on Kiev's Independence Square (Maidan) against the former president Yanukovich and his decision not to sign an economic association agreement with the EU due to pressure from Russia (November 2013–February 2014). As the protest escalated to serious violent clashes, Yanukovich and other government officials fled to Russia in February 2014 and an interim government with both pro-EU and radical right-wing politicians was formed. International confrontation escalated in the second period of the crisis (February–March 2014) after Russia responded to the change in power structures in Ukraine by incorporating Crimea, the population of which is 60% Russian and where the Russian Black Sea Fleet is stationed. In international protests against this Russian action, German chancellor Merkel ensured a unified position within the EU, supported by the US, of holding back from active crisis management (Dempsey, 2015). Together with then French president Hollande, Merkel also represented the position of the EU and the US in peace negotiations in Minsk dealing with the Eastern Ukraine military conflict between the new Ukrainian government and pro-Russian separatist movements supported by the Russian military. Despite the signing of two ceasefire agreements in Minsk in September 2014 and February 2015, the violence in Eastern Ukraine continues. The ongoing war in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine (Donbass) constitutes the third period of the Ukraine crisis (since April 2014).

From its beginning, the crisis has had an international dimension concerning relations between Russia on one side and Western countries and alliances on the other. Confrontations have repeatedly manifested in mutual assignments of blame, economic sanctions imposed by the EU and the US and travel bans. During this time, Russian and EU political leaders were criticized for engaging in heated

confrontations dealing with anti-EU propaganda on the one side and old Soviet enemy images on the other, establishing a climate often referred to as a new Cold War (MacFarlane, 2016). Similarly, mass media on both sides have been blamed for biased and confrontational journalism that downplayed the other side's perspective and escalated the conflict into a serious crisis (e.g., Abdullaev, 2014).

A crisis is a disruptive event that is perceived as 'a serious threat to the basic structures or fundamental values and norms of a system' (Rosenthal et al., 1989: 10), such as security, democracy and human rights. In the case of an international crisis, the perception of threat refers most frequently to a change in the type or intensity of the interactions between two or more states that affects the structure of the international state-system (Wilkenfeld et al., 2003). In this respect, story lines or frames (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987) provided by the media play a crucial role in forming the public's perception of events as a crisis and its interpretation, for instance, as a new Cold War between Russia and the West or as a humanitarian catastrophe (Hammond, 2007; Messinger, 2011). At the same time, the media raise expectations about legitimate political actions by discussing the causes and possible consequences of crises and by addressing questions of responsibility (Jakobsen, 2000).

As a result, the media not only report crisis events but also have a 'more active *performative* involvement and *constitutive* role' (Cottle, 2006: 9, emphasis in original). They mediatize crises (Hjarvard et al., 2015) in the sense that their significance as a source of information and their presumed effects on public opinion are recognized by politicians and other societal actors adapting to the media (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck and Esser, 2014). Therefore, public speakers can be considered to engage in strategic frame building aiming at media attention and public support and taking a specific media logic into account (De Vreese, 2014; Olsson et al., 2015). Once a frame has become prevalent in media discourse, it can be considered to influence political crisis management and to encourage politicians to use either problem-solving or instead contentious tactics (Reuben, 2009). For example, in the Ukraine crisis, compromises between the parties on the international level as well as inside the country were likely affected by a *constructive or destructive way of framing* the crisis in the media.

As German–Russian relations proved to be of crucial importance to the crisis management (Forsberg, 2016), this study focuses on the framing of the crisis in both countries' media. To capture the story line expressed in a frame as well as its constructive or destructive character, we integrate criteria for constructive journalism into frame methodology. The analysis looks at in-depth debates on television (TV) political talk shows that are considered to be important inter-media agenda-setters (Roth, 2016), providing frames on the crisis in their respective national media environments. The article examines how the Ukraine crisis is framed in political talk shows in the two conflicting countries and how constructive or destructive the frames are, considering their consequences in terms of political crisis negotiations. To answer these questions, a qualitative content analysis of a sample of Russian and German talk shows was performed.

Constructive media crisis communication

The media's active role in constructive crisis communication and crisis management has been acknowledged in research programs such as peace journalism, positive journalism and constructive journalism. These loosely connected approaches all deal with the normative idea of responsible media behaviour that is sensitive to media effects on individuals and to its consequences for political processes (Gyldensted, 2015; McGoldrick, 2008). These approaches argue that the media should avoid cynicism and instead motivate participation in the democratic process. Further, in times of crisis, the media should act as a neutral third power, communicating between conflicting parties and bystanders and stimulating mutual motivation for conflict resolution (Peleg, 2006).

From this perspective, *peace journalism* serves as a normative working concept for journalistic coverage of war and conflict (Galtung, 1998; Lee and Maslog, 2005; Lynch, 2013; Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005; Youngblood, 2016). Criteria developed to assign media coverage to war or peace frames (Lee and Maslog, 2005; Lynch, 2013; Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005) focus on the use or absence of emotional, victory-orientated, demonizing and victimizing language as well as on the content of media coverage. According to this, peace journalists should, for example, direct attention to civil society and peace initiatives instead of strategic political communication, provide context instead of covering violence and spectacle and discuss methods of crisis resolution instead of asking for winners and losers (Lynch, 2013). Although Lynch and McGoldrick (2005) describe peace journalism as an accurate and conflict-sensitive way of framing stories, empirical studies (Ersoy, 2016; Fahmy and Eakin, 2014; Ross and Tehranian, 2009; Workneh, 2011) frequently find that only a small share of media coverage fulfils peace frame criteria.

Therefore, it is no surprise that the peace journalism approach has been heavily criticized for raising high normative expectations that are in contrast to news selection criteria and professional norms such as, for instance, objectivity (Hanitzsch, 2007; Lee, 2010; Loyn, 2007). In particular, perspectives on the approach that emphasize the idea of *positive journalism* (Dyer, 2015) argue that the media cannot simply concentrate on positive or peace-related news instead of negative messages such as violence (Bidlo, 2015). In addition, some scholars (Tenenboim-Weinblatt et al., 2016) criticize the rather crude dichotomization of media pieces into a war frame and a peace frame in empirical studies. Drawing on generic instead of thematic frames (De Vreese, 2005), this approach fails to consider a nuanced classification or explore the specific story lines presented by the media about crises and conflicts.

Different from that, *constructive journalism* (Gyldensted, 2015; Haagerup, 2014; McIntyre, 2015), a 'light' version of peace journalism, provides a more realistic and viable approach to the analysis of media coverage in times of crises and allows for a more nuanced operationalization. Constructive journalism accepts the central ideas of peace journalism but dispenses with the role of journalists as peace activists

(McIntyre, 2015). Instead of prescribing to journalists *what* issues they should report on, it refers to *how* issues should be presented. While balanced coverage, which shows the views of all conflicting parties, is part of the standard repertoire of quality journalism, constructive journalism further aims to address possible *problem solutions* (Gyldensted, 2015; Haagerup, 2014; McIntyre, 2015). Instead of blaming one side, it sheds light on problems and promotes a deeper *understanding of the causes* of the respective crisis or conflict.

Although criteria for constructive journalism have not yet been operationalized systematically in empirical studies, existing frame analyses on international crises (Entman, 2004; Hammond, 2007; Robinson et al., 2010) give evidence of the prevalence of a destructive style in news coverage. Despite the fact that in the 21st century, the media are less restricted to official sources and also include alternative voices (Balmas et al., 2014; Kampf and Liebes, 2013), official frames from the respective country's government and military are found to strongly influence media content (Bennett, 1990; Bennett et al., 2006; Roman et al., 2017; Rowling et al., 2011). The so-called indexing (Bennet, 1990) of official positions by the media leads to one-sided coverage, especially when the government's frames are not regularly challenged by leading opposition politicians or by representatives from other institutions (Groshek, 2008). As a result, the media tend to blame the opponent's side, falling short of reflecting different points of view from alternative sources (Hamelink, 2011: 34). Although each event must be considered to be reported in a specific story line, recent research on media coverage has identified some general frames that make sense of international crises by constructing an evil opponent and legitimizing military actions or political confrontation (Hamelink, 2011). For example, after 9/11, the frames *War on Terrorism* and *Humanitarian Intervention* became prominent in the media (Hammond, 2007). Also, the tensions between Russia and the EU and the US during the Five-Day War in Georgia in 2008 (Nitsch and Lichtenstein, 2013) and during the Ukraine crisis (Pantti, 2016; Roman et al., 2017) have been framed as instances of re-emergence of the Cold War. The Cold War frame places events within a geopolitical power struggle between Russia and Western countries and alliances. These frames are suitable to fuel fears and confrontation. They stand in contrast to principles of constructive journalism, which is concerned with finding solutions to identified problems and with the deeper causes of a crisis instead of blaming or demonizing one party (Gyldensted, 2015; Haagerup, 2014; McIntyre, 2015).

Research questions

Building on the concept of constructive journalism, this article analyses frames on the Ukraine crisis in political talk show discussions in Russia and Germany. Therefore, we pose two research questions that address the content of frames as well as their constructive or destructive character.

Starting from the normative idea of balanced coverage, we assume that talk shows in both countries offer the differing perspectives of the major conflicting

parties. According to the indexing thesis (Bennett, 1990), talk show discussions are, however, supposed to follow the perspective of national political elites. As a consequence, frames might differ between Russian and German shows. In our first research question, we ask:

RQ1: How do Russian and German TV political talk shows frame the Ukraine crisis?

As talk show guests can be supposed to adapt to media logic, their contributions might trigger conflict rather than crisis reconciliation (Strömbäck and Esser, 2014). We therefore expect to find basically destructive frames on the crisis that deal with blaming one party and highlight confrontational treatment recommendations. Particularly in the confrontational format typical for political talk shows, constructive frames are expected to play a minor role. In our second research question, we ask:

RQ2: To what extent are constructive and destructive frames used in Russian and German TV political talk shows?

Method

To answer the research questions, a qualitative content analysis of German and Russian TV political talk shows is conducted. The aim of the study is to identify frames that structure the debate on the Ukraine crisis in both countries' talk shows during the three periods of the crisis defined above. Instead of examining the frequency of specific predefined frames, we thus exploit the advantages of qualitative research as applied to the complexity and nuances of frames provided in the talk shows (Altheide, 1996; Cassell and Symon, 1994). Following Mayring's (2014) approach, the principles of openness and systematic methodology are combined (Kohlbacher, 2006).

Sample

The study analyses four prominent political talk shows in Russian and five in German TV that are broadcasted on major national television channels in the evening (starting between 8 and 10 p.m.) and could be retrieved from the channels' online archives. The Russian shows stem from the state-owned channel *Россия 1* (Russia-1) and the channel *НТВ* (NTV), which is owned by state-controlled firm Gazprom. Both are bound by principles of ideological and political pluralism according to the Constitution of the Russian Federation and the Law of the Russian Federation on Mass Media. The shows on Russia-1 are *Политика* (Politics), *Специальный корреспондент* (Special Correspondent) and *Воскресный вечер с Владимиром Соловьёвым* (Sunday Evening with Vladimir Soloviev); from NTV, the show *Список Норкина* (Norkin's List)

is selected. The German shows are from public service TV that stands for information and quality, is financed by a public broadcast fee and is controlled in its standards by the Broadcasting Board, which consists of all major political parties and societal institutions. Article 5(1) of the German basic law and the Interstate Treaty on Broadcasting and Telemedia (Rundfunkstaatsvertrag) highlight the values of balanced coverage and plurality of opinions in public service broadcasting. In detail, we analyse the shows *Anne Will*, *Günther Jauch*, *Hart aber fair* (Hard but fair) and *Menschen bei Maischberger* (People at Maischberger) broadcasted on the First German Channel (Das Erste) and *Maybrit Illner* on the Second German Channel (ZDF).

All shows have a similar format: The moderator directs questions to guests from politics, economy, media, science and civil society but also enables an exchange of opinions and dispute between the guests. Short films provoke debates and provide background information; statements from the studio audience as well as comments via email or Facebook are frequently included. Russian shows, however, are characterized by a large number of speakers (about twelve per episode) and rapid turn-taking during discussions. This differs from German shows, wherein about five guests participate in each episode.

The time period under study starts in November 2013, includes the three crisis phases of the Maidan protests (November 2013–February 2014), the Russian incorporation of Crimea (March–April 2014) and the Eastern Ukraine military conflict (since April 2014), and ends in December 2015. In Russia, with a total number of 175 broadcasts, the Ukraine crisis was an extensively discussed issue on all political talk shows throughout the period examined, starting with a critical discussion on the planned agreement of association of Ukraine with the EU and with the Maidan protests in November 2013. However, particularly strong attention was devoted to events in Crimea and on economic sanctions against Russia, as well as to Ukrainian parliamentary elections and the growing separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine (see peaks in March, April and October 2014, Figure 1). The last peak was in February 2015 during peace negotiations in Minsk and the subsequent violation of the ceasefire. In comparison, the Ukraine crisis received less attention on German talk shows, featuring in only 32 broadcasts and starting later, in February 2014, at the time when the issue had gained considerable international importance. Most shows were broadcast in February and March 2014 during the struggle for Crimea. Further peaks, as in Russia, arose in December 2014 and in February 2015. Later on, the Ukraine crisis vanished from the German agenda.

For each country, 10 randomly selected episodes from among all 175 Russian talk show broadcasts and 10 from among all 32 German broadcasts are chosen and analysed.¹ Among the selected Russian shows, three each were broadcast during period I (Maidan) and period II (Crimea) of the Ukraine crisis, while four are from period III (Eastern Ukraine); among the German shows, six are from period II and four from period III. During period I, no German show covered the Ukraine crisis, but discussions in the later shows continuously refer to the Maidan protests and include frames on this event.

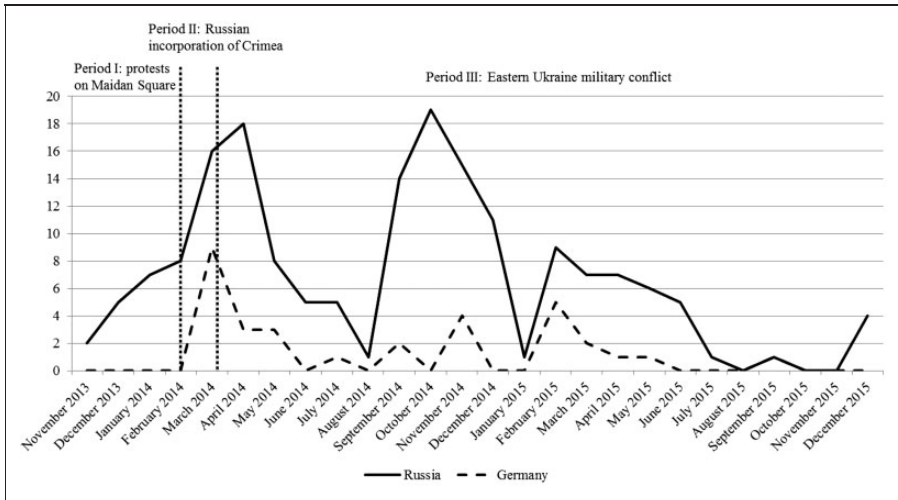


Figure 1. Number of talk shows featuring the Ukraine crisis over time (absolute numbers).

Besides the time frame of the selected shows, the framing of the crisis is influenced by the guests participating in the shows. In the selected Russian shows, most of the 121 guest appearances are by politicians (51), but appearances also include scientists (19), journalists (18) and publicists (11). In 10 cases, actors from civil society participate in the shows. Similar to this, in the German shows, most of the 57 guest appearances are by politicians (32), journalists (11) and scientists (7). The dominance of politicians indicates a high presence of official frames in shows from both countries. While most of the guests stem from Russia in Russian shows and from Germany in German shows, foreign representatives are regularly considered. In the Russian shows, they stem from Ukraine (18 appearances), Crimea (5), Belarus, Latvia, Poland and Greece (each 1). The German shows include guests from Russia (10 appearances), the US (8), Luxemburg (2) and Poland (1). The selection of guests might go along with predominantly national frames.

Coding procedure

The analysis inductively generates thematic frames by systemizing and condensing frames uttered in the chosen content. Therefore, criteria for constructive journalism are operationalized using Entman's framing approach. According to Entman (1993: 52), a thematic frame consists of a combination of four frame elements, that is 'a particular *problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described.' As problem definitions 'often virtually predetermine the rest of the frame' (Entman, 2004: 6), it is considered to be the most important frame element.

Although this definition has been criticized for lacking conceptual clarity (Borah, 2011), it is an analysis framework that is used frequently in empirical

media and communication studies. However, Jecker's (2014) review on theoretical and empirical studies drawing on Entman's framing approach criticizes two important points: (1) in identifying ambiguous and often contradictory ways to operationalize the frame element *causal interpretation*, she suggests differentiating between causal interpretations referring (a) *to situations* and (b) *to persons*; (2) she questions the discriminatory power between *causal interpretation* and *moral evaluation*, pointing out that a causal interpretation that refers to a person usually entails an attribution of blame and thus encompasses morality. Taking this into account, we differentiate between four frame elements that are all centred on the depiction of a specific problem and its treatment: (1) a *problem definition*; (2) a *situational causal interpretation* for the problem highlighting the broader context; (3) a *personal causal interpretation* that blames a person or a collective actor for the crisis and (4) a *treatment recommendation* for the problem defined, which is frequently linked to an attribution of responsibility to act. While constructive frames emphasize situational causal interpretation and focus on problem treatments that enable de-escalation and crisis reconciliation, destructive frames address personal causal interpretations and either provide no ideas for problem treatments or support confrontational treatments.

The guests' statements in the shows are coded by two German and two Russian coders using the frame elements as the central categories. The analysis was conducted in several iterative steps (Mayring, 2014). After the coding of a part of the material, frames that had already emerged were grouped together and were used as new categories. This was done several times until no new frames were found. After each iterative step, the material was again coded. We finally structured the frames into frame groups based on their thematic content. According to the emphasized frame elements, we finally differentiated between constructive and destructive frames.

Results

In analysing the sample of 10 Russian and 10 German talk show broadcasts, we found 12 different frames for Russia and 13 frames for Germany. The debate include two main focuses: frames on the situation inside Ukraine and frames on international tensions between Russia and the West. For both strands of the debate, frames are grouped by their *problem definition* and distinguished according to the other three frame elements – the situational causal interpretation, the personal causal interpretation and the problem treatment – and assigned to one of the three time periods of the Ukraine crisis.

Frames on the situation inside Ukraine

Frames used in the discussion on the situation inside Ukraine refer to the Maidan protests (period I) and the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine (period III), but they also connect different periods of the crisis in a comprehensive story line. In this

Table 1. Frames on the situation inside Ukraine.

Frame group	Frames in Russian talk shows	Frames in German talk shows
Politics	Yanukovych Lost Ukraine Antidemocratic Movement Freedom Struggle against Kiev's Hegemony Russia's Sphere of Influence	Separatist Aggression Freedom Struggle against Kiev's Hegemony Civil Uprising
Economy and population	Stabilize Ukraine Bottomless Pit	Economic Structure Human Interest

light, instead of distinguishing the frames according to time periods, they are classified into two groups according to their respective problem definition concerning (1) politics and (2) economy and population (see Table 1).

Frames on politics in Ukraine. Among the Russian talk shows, four frames address the political destabilization of Ukraine as a problem. The frame *Yanukovych Lost Ukraine* refers to the Maidan protests and blames the former president Yanukovych and the Ukrainian security service for having triggered and escalated the Maidan protests into a 'revolution' (Alexander Gordon, Russian journalist, *Политика*, 4 December 2013). While violent reactions to the protests are criticized, Yanukovych is accused of a failed foreign policy that tried 'to play Russia and the EU off against each other' (Alexander Privalov, Russian journalist, *Политика*, 4 December 2013), hoping for economic support from both sides. To avoid the immanent collapse of the country, the frame calls all conflicting parties to restore the country's unity peacefully in new democratic parliamentary elections. In addition, Russia should further 'cooperate with Ukraine, but should not pay for the country's loyalty' (Georgy Bovt, Russian political expert, *Политика*, 4 December 2013).

An opposing view is expressed by the frame *Antidemocratic Movement*, which is used with reference to the Maidan protests. It accuses the Maidan protesters of an 'anti-constitutional, anti-democratic rebellion' (Sergey Kurginyan, Russian political activist, *Специальный корреспондент*, 21 January 2014) against the elected president Yanukovych. It stresses that the new Kiev government lacks legitimacy and disregards minority rights. In the later period of the Ukraine crisis, during the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine, this frame is complemented by the frame *Freedom Struggle against Kiev's Hegemony* that blames the new Kiev government for disregarding diversity in Ukraine and for discriminating against the population in Eastern Ukraine. Both frames call Russia to engage as protective force for the people in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. Using the frame *Freedom Struggle against Kiev's Hegemony* Vladimir Pligin, Russian politician from the governing United Russia Party, states: 'All Russian actions aim at protecting citizens' right to life against pseudo-fascists who have seized power and violated the

constitution of Ukraine' (*Воскресный вечер с Владимиром Соловьёвым*, 7 March 2014). This includes ideas ranging from supporting the movement in Eastern Ukraine to plans for an independent Eastern Ukrainian state.

In contrast, the frame *Russia's Sphere of Influence* stresses that the destabilization of the Ukrainian political system results from Russia patronizing Ukraine. Using this frame, the Polish journalist Arleta Bojke states: 'The Ukrainians – similar to people in Poland – want to decide their own destiny by themselves, but Russia wants to decide for others' (*Политика*, 4 December 2013). As a problem treatment, it is claimed that Russia should respect the country as a sovereign state.

The frames *Freedom Struggle against Kiev's Hegemony* and *Russia's Sphere of Influence* have equivalents in German shows. Thereby, the frame *Freedom Struggle against Kiev's Hegemony* is slightly adapted to the German audience calling not Russia but EU countries to engage against hegemonic politics in Eastern Ukraine and not to recognize the new Kiev government (Alexander Sorkin, Russian journalist *Anne Will*, 16 April 2014).

The frame *Civil Uprising* that has similarities to the frame *Russia's Sphere of Influence* in the Russian shows takes an opposing view. Referring to the Maidan protests, this frame holds that Ukraine collapsed in revolution not only against the strong political influence of oligarchs but also against Russia supporting a system of corruption and suppression in Ukraine (Marie-Luise Beck, German Green Party, *Maybrit Illner*, 26 February 2015). In its problem treatment, the frame calls upon the new Ukraine government to display responsible behaviour towards its citizens and to preserve the country's unity.

However, different from the Russian debate, the third political frame in German talk shows refers predominantly to current war events in Eastern Ukraine. The frame *Separatist Aggression* engages in blaming separatists in Eastern Ukraine for violence and takes a critical stance on Russia for tolerating or even supporting separatist movements. As two German politicians from the conservative Christian Democratic Party (CDU), Armin Laschet (*Anne Will*, 16 April 2014) and Norbert Röttgen (*Günther Jauch*, 15 February 2015), argue, separatists' actions might not be controlled or directed by the Kremlin, but Russia seems at least not willing to use its influence on separatists in the name of peace in Ukraine. This is explained by a strategic Russian interest in de-stabilizing Ukraine to block its accession to the EU. The frame includes warnings about supplying arms to Ukraine for self-defence, based on the argument that this would give Russia the pretext for overt military action. It recommends that the West should put pressure on Russia.

Frames on economy and population in Ukraine. Frames that define Ukraine's weak economy as the main problem of the crisis refer first and foremost to the Maidan protests, but these frames are also used in later time periods of the crisis. In Russian talk shows, two frames come to opposing conclusions regarding the question of whether and how Russia should become involved in Ukrainian economic problems. The frame *Stabilize Ukraine* argues that the Maidan protests

and the subsequent instability could lead to a complete collapse of the economy. It highlights a Russian responsibility for its neighbouring country and suggests 'investments and a close connection between Ukraine and Russia in the next ten years' (Konstantin Kostin, United Russia Party, *Политика*, 27 November 2013). In contrast, the frame *Bottomless Pit* emphasizes that the country's economy could suffer from persistently accommodated incompetence and corruption. As the Ukrainian journalist Pavel Kazarin puts it: 'the economy in Ukraine hasn't been stable for the last 22 years' (*Специальный корреспондент*, 21 January 2014). The frame blames Ukrainian and Russian oligarchs and 'colonial powers' (Vladislav Krivobokov, Ukrainian politician, *Политика*, 16 March 2014) for destroying the country's economic interests. Further, it is stated that as long as oligarchs' influence on politics continues, Russia should concentrate on its own economy rather than investing in Ukraine.

In German talk shows, the frame *Economic Structure* explains the weak Ukrainian economy through political and economic corruption and highlights the necessity of stabilizing Ukraine's economic structures (e.g., Fritz Pleitgen, German journalist, *Anne Will*, 5 March 2014). In contrast to the Russian debate, the causal interpretation is extended by blaming Putin for having forced Yanukovich to reject the agreement of association with the EU as a way of keeping Ukraine dependent on Russia (e.g., Werner Schulz, German Green Party, *Anne Will*, 30 April 2014).

Further, along with the discussion on economic and political problems in Ukraine, German talk shows problematize the suffering of citizens due to violence in the escalation of the Maidan protests and the war in Eastern Ukraine. As a problem explanation, the frame *Human Interest* points to the structural complexity within Ukraine, including different ethnic and religious groups drifting into a spiral of aggression. The frame avoids blaming a single side for the crisis and argues 'for dialogue and an immediate stop to the war' (Marina Weisband, German political activist, *Maybrit Illner*, 6 March 2014).

Constructive and destructive frames on the situation in Ukraine. In the next step, the identified frames are classified as constructive or destructive according to their respective situational or personal causal interpretation for the problems defined and their treatment recommendation (see Table 2).

In Russian as well as in German shows, only two frames on the situation inside Ukraine can be classified as constructive. In Russian shows, the frames *Russia's Sphere of Influence* and *Stabilize Ukraine* avoid a personal causal interpretation and call for enabling Ukraine to gain political and economic stability. Both frames identify situational causes for the crisis: Ukrainian dependence on Russia and the tense political situation inside the country endanger its stability and capacity to act. This is similar to the frames *Civil Uprising* and *Human Interest* in German talk shows. Both frames refer to Russian involvement in problems in Ukraine, but they refrain from blaming one party and instead call for a peaceful problem treatment in the interest of Ukraine.

Table 2. Constructive and destructive frames on the situation inside Ukraine.

	Russian shows	German shows
Constructive frames	Russia's Sphere of Influence Stabilize Ukraine	Civil Uprising Human Interest
In-between	Bottomless Pit	Economic Structure
Destructive frames	Yanukovich Lost Ukraine Antidemocratic Movement Freedom Struggle against Kiev's Hegemony	Separatist Aggression Freedom Struggle against Kiev's Hegemony

In Russian talk shows, other frames that are not classified as constructive deal with personal causal interpretations, blaming the Yanukovich government and Ukrainian oligarchs or the Maidan movement and the Kiev government. In its treatment recommendation, the frame *Bottomless Pit* calls for ignoring Ukraine's problems and falls thus as between constructive and destructive in character. In contrast, the frames *Yanukovich Lost Ukraine*, *Antidemocratic Movement* and *Freedom Struggle against Kiev's Hegemony* are destructive. They all combine the attribution of blame with the treatment recommendation of intervention in Ukraine, which is to say, legitimizing military action in the name of human rights and political stability.

In German talk shows, frames that are not classified as constructive address blame to the new Kiev government for violating minority rights. Even more frequently, they blame the separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine for aggression and Russia for supporting separatists and keeping Ukraine in a state of economic dependence. However, the frame *Economic Structure* entails a constructive treatment recommendation that supports economic help for Ukraine. While this frame falls between constructive and destructive, the frames *Separatist Aggression* and *Freedom Struggle against Kiev's Hegemony* follow a clearly destructive logic. They combine the blaming of one party with appeals to EU countries to enter confrontation.

With reference to the periods of the Ukraine crisis, Russian shows tend to frame the Maidan protests in a destructive way. German shows frame the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine destructively while framing the Maidan protests in a more constructive way.

Frames on international tensions

Within the talk show debates about international tensions surrounding the Ukraine crisis, frames refer to problems in international relations that escalated during the Russian incorporation of Crimea (period II). Most of the frames, however, were addressed before and after this event and provide a broader story line for interpreting confrontations between Russia and the West. The frames are summarized

Table 3. Frames on international tensions surrounding the crisis.

Frame group	Frames in Russian talk shows	Frames in German talk shows
International politics	Pressure from the EU US's Attack against Russia Great Power Politics	Violation of International Law The West is Expanding US Imperialism Great Power Politics
National politics	Russia's Weakness	Realpolitik West Must Show Strength
Media and public opinion	Anti-Russian Propaganda Russian Propaganda	Propaganda in Russia Biased German Media

into three groups that deal with (1) international politics, (2) national politics and (3) media and public opinion (see Table 3).

Frames on international politics. Most of the frames with a focus on international politics reflect on the global players' responsibility for the crisis. In Russian talk shows during all three time periods, the crisis is described as caused by the West: the US and the EU are accused of threatening Ukraine's sovereignty. The frame *Pressure from the EU* argues that the EU would interfere in Ukrainian politics and parliament composition, aiming at a political transformation of Ukraine that would bring the country closer to the EU instead of to Russia (e.g., Leonid Kalashnikov, Russian Communist Party, *Политика*, 27 November 2013). This idea is combined with blaming the EU for immoral behaviour motivated by an economic need for 'low-cost labor' (Afanasios Ciolas-Avgerinos, Greek journalist, *Политика*, 4 December 2013) from Ukraine. As a problem treatment, this frame supports the idea that the new Ukrainian government should resist and re-orient its politics from the EU to a close relationship to Russia.

The frame *US's Attack against Russia* focuses on the role of the US in the crisis. It states that US troops in Ukraine are trying to further escalate the conflict. According to this frame, the US initiated war in Ukraine in order to provoke Russia into a reaction so that they could then declare a 'New Cold War' (Igor Korotchenko, Russian Communist Party, *Список Норкина*, 12 December 2014) with the aim of weakening Russia in world politics and economy. The blaming of the US is combined with references to US foreign policy interests to obtain status as the only world power (e.g., Sergey Kurginyan, Russian political activist, *Список Норкина*, 12 December 2014). In consequence, the frame prompts Russia to resist by unifying the Slavic states and to consider military actions.

In the German debate, the frame *Violation of International Law* characterizes Russia as an authoritarian state with strong ambitions to gain a powerful position in world politics and 'to re-establish the old Soviet Empire' (Elmar Brok, CDU,

Anne Will, 5 March 2014). This frame had already been used during the Maidan protests when Russian pressure on the Yanukovych government was criticized. However, it became most prominent during and after the incorporation of Crimea. Russia is accused of having ‘violated international law in an unacceptable way and disregarding Ukraine’s territorial integrity for its own geopolitical interests’ (Norbert Röttgen, CDU, *Hart aber fair*, 17 March 2014). The frame emphasizes the need to negotiate with Russia but also includes the treatment recommendation of initiating or intensifying economic sanctions against Russia.

In addition, two frames in the German shows interpret Russian behaviour during all three periods of the Ukraine crisis as a reaction to enlargement of the EU and NATO, which is perceived by Russia as a threat to its own security interests. The frame *The West Is Expanding* refrains from attributing blame to individual countries or politicians. Instead, it explains the causes of the problem in terms of a more structural Western ignorance of Russia after 1990. It is frequently argued that ‘the West has seen itself as the winner of the Cold War and marked Russia as the loser, ignoring chances for cooperation in the new international order and appropriate signals from Russia’ (Gabriele Krone-Schmalz, German journalist, *Günther Jauch*, 23 November 2014). The frame does not suspect the EU or the US of following an imperialistic strategy, but it insists that the West should admit to its own mistakes.

In contrast to this, the frame *US Imperialism* attributes a strong geopolitical and economic interest to the US with regard to NATO enlargement and separating Ukraine from Russia (e.g., Sarah Wagenknecht, German Left Party, *Maybrit Illner*, 26 February 2015). It blames the US for prioritizing economic self-interest rather than political common sense and explains Russian actions, especially in Crimea, as a reaction to Western actions rather than as acts of aggression.

In contrast, the frame *Great Power Politics* has a stronger focus on changes in the international system of states. It is expressed in Russian as well as in German talk shows during all periods of the crisis and points at pressure from global players on Russia’s neighbouring countries, leading to international crisis. The causal interpretation infers competition among political actors such as Russia, the US, NATO and the EU, all engaging in great power politics, striving for influence in the post-Soviet space, and disregarding the interests and well-being of citizens in ways that might cause protest movements (e.g., Martin Schulz, German Social Democratic Party SPD, *Maybrit Illner*, 26 February 2015; Vadim Karasev, Ukrainian politician, *Политика*, 4 December 2013). As a treatment, the establishment of a multipolar global structure with more political de-centralization is advocated. In the case of Ukraine, the frame calls for both the West and Russia to engage in de-escalation and negotiations about the future of Ukraine.

Frames on national politics. Frames on national politics reflect the situation in each country with regard to readiness for confrontation on the international level and are addressed first and foremost to the incorporation of Crimea and the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine. In Russian talk shows, the frame *Russia’s Weakness*

describes Russia as 'economically isolated and unable to withstand a New Cold War' (Vladimir Annushkin, Russian political scientist, *Специальный корреспондент*, 8 April 2014). As a problem treatment, this frame calls on Russia to negotiate a compromise with the EU. Negotiations between the Russian president Putin and the new Ukrainian president Poroshenko are perceived as a signal that the economic sanctions from the West are forcing Russia to make concessions (e.g., Oles Busyna, Ukrainian journalist, *Список Норкина*, 12 September 2014).

In the German shows, two frames address options for national and Western politics towards Russia after the incorporation of Crimea. Both problematize the insufficient power of the Western alliances, NATO and the EU to deal with global problems, for example, in Syria. The frame *Realpolitik* therefore highlights the need for cooperation with Russia in international politics and explicitly rejects any moral evaluation of Russian politics. It recognizes the Russian incorporation of Crimea as 'a fait accompli that makes economic sanctions senseless' (Egon Bahr, SPD, *Maybrit Illner*, 6 March 2014). As a solution, this frame advocates a more pragmatic *realpolitik* to restore peace in Europe and relations with Russia. In sharp contrast to this, the frame *West Must Show Strength* follows the idea that a hesitant attitude on the part of Western governments is the main cause of the crisis. As the US political scientist James Davis put it: 'If we have fear of politics of deterrence, we leave the field for Russia' (*Maybrit Illner*, 26 February 2015). This frame calls for a show of strength, meaning sanctions against Russia as well as deterrence, such as an increased NATO presence in the Baltic and arms supplies to Ukraine.

Frames on media and public opinion. A final group of frames takes media and public opinion into account; it refers in Russian shows to all three crisis periods and in German shows to international conflicts about the incorporation of Crimea and the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine. In Russia, the frame *Anti-Russian Propaganda* entails the idea of an information war against Russia not only inside Ukraine but also inside the US and EU countries. Accordingly, in the West, disinformation results in anti-Russian hysteria, and in Ukraine open Russophobia transforms people into a 'zombie population' (Sergey Zheleznyak, United Russia Party, *Специальный корреспондент*, 8 April 2014) and undermines peace and security. It is stated that disinformation is launched by Ukrainian elites and Western stakeholders who hold control in mass media in their respective countries. In consequence, Russia should engage in the information war by actively communicating to the various countries' publics.

In contrast to this, the frame *Russian Propaganda* rejects any ideas of conspiracy against Russia. Instead, according to this frame, Russia itself is to blame for an anti-Russian atmosphere in the US and EU countries due to confrontational actions in Ukraine and its open accusations against the US (e.g., Michael Bohm, American journalist, *Список Норкина*, 12 December 2014). This frame criticizes Russian media coverage for fostering sentiments against the US over a long

period, thereby creating a supportive environment for confrontation in foreign policy. Therefore, Russian media are urged to de-escalate.

In the German debate, two frames criticize the media and politicians for their aggressive style of communication, adopting a one-sided perspective, using war language and engaging in the scapegoating of their ‘opponent’. The frame *Propaganda in Russia* points only to Russia and blames Putin for actively influencing Russian media to spread anti-Western propaganda (e.g., John Kornblum, American political expert, *Anne Will*, 5 March 2014). In contrast, the frame *Biased German Media* criticizes mass media in Germany for adopting a one-sided perspective, demonizing Putin and using Cold War stereotypes (e.g., Matthias Platzeck, SPD, *Günther Jauch*, 23 November 2014; Fritz Pleitgen, German journalist, *Anne Will*, 5 March 2014). It does not assign blame for political propaganda but states that German journalists and politicians have problems obtain an overview of the situation and refer to culturally rooted stereotypes.

Constructive and destructive frames on the situation in Ukraine. Regarding the classification into constructive or destructive frames, parts of the Russian as well as the German debate follow a constructive logic supporting negotiations between Russia and the West (see Table 4).

In both countries, the frame *Great Power Politics* includes a causal interpretation that is not restricted to the political actions of only one side but addresses Russia as well as the EU and the US. Moreover, in Russian shows, the frame *Russian Propaganda* recognizes at least partial Russian responsibility for the crisis, explained by mistakes in politics and by disinformation. This differs from the frame *Russia’s Weakness*, which neither addresses any Russian responsibility for the crisis nor rejects the idea of competition between Russia on one side and the US and the EU on the other. However, although it is motivated by pragmatism only, the frame calls for an active de-escalation and is thus classified as constructive.

Similar to the Russian debate, reflexive and more pragmatic constructive frames can be found in the German shows. The frames *The West Is Expanding* and *Biased*

Table 4. Constructive and destructive frames on international tensions.

	Russian shows	German shows
Constructive frames	Great Power Politics Russia’s Weakness Russian Propaganda	The West is Expanding Great Power Politics Realpolitik Biased German Media
Destructive frames	Pressure from the EU US’s Attack against Russia Anti-Russian Propaganda	Violation of International Law West Must Show Strength US Imperialism Propaganda in Russia

German Media include a critical view of the Western role in international politics and communication leading to the crisis. Instead of attributing blame, they explain the problems via a more situational causal interpretation.

More destructive frames address personal causal interpretations that refer to only one side in the crisis. In Russian talk shows, these frames blame Western politics and Western media for triggering the crisis. None of the frames *Pressure from the EU*, *US's Attack against Russia*, and *Anti-Russian Propaganda* support negotiations, but instead, they call Russia and politics in Ukraine to resist and thus enter confrontation with the West.

In the German shows, the frames *Violation of International Law* and *West Must Show Strength* blame Russia for the crisis and support the destructive problem treatments of imposing economic sanctions and demonstrating military strength. Similarly, the frame *US's Attack against Russia* follows a destructive logic but, in its content, opposes the other identified destructive frames in German shows: It blames the US for aggressive and illegitimate behaviour in Ukraine and thus legitimizes Russian actions in Crimea and in Eastern Ukraine.

In sum, constructive frames from shows in both countries refer basically to the escalation of international tensions during the incorporation of Crimea. Destructive frames follow a broader story line that makes sense of all three periods of the Ukraine crisis as part of a global conflict between Russia and the West that is a continuation of the Cold War.

Discussion

Although results from a qualitative content analysis cannot be seen as representative of all talk show debates or the Russian and German media debate in general, the identified frames highlight similarities and differences between the countries' perspectives on the crisis that help to explain conflicts on the international level between Russia and the West. In addition, it provides insights for political crisis resolution.

Looking at the content of these frames, the findings reveal that the Maidan protests, the incorporation of Crimea and the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine have been discussed from multiple perspectives in both countries. In Russian talk shows that direct much attention to the Maidan protests, the stability of Ukrainian politics and economy is highly discussed, and the shows tend to closely examine the complexities within the country, Yanukovich's political strategy and the new government's legal situation. In contrast, the German debate spends less effort seeking a deeper understanding of the structural problems inside Ukraine, but rather places great emphasis on international confrontation and violence in the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine, highlighting the responsibility of separatist movements and the new Kiev government. While the German shows discuss different Western political strategies in dealing with the crisis and reflect on Russia's behaviour as an aggression as well as a reaction to Western politics, Russian shows are more concerned with Russia's economic and political

capacity to persist in the international crisis and the need to protect Russian minorities in Ukraine. Even though talk shows in both countries criticize both Russian and Western politics and include foreign representatives, their coverage is in line with the indexing thesis (Bennett, 1990). The shows have a high share of guests from national politics and tend to reflect on the crisis through the glasses of national foreign policy. As a result, some frames in Russian and German shows are similar in their main idea while differing in important details; the shows thus fail to enable a deeper understanding of different national perspectives on the crisis. For example, while Russian talk shows suggest a political interest behind the perceived Russophobia and anti-Russian sentiments in Western media, German shows explain the sometimes one-sided coverage in German media by a lack of knowledge and old stereotypes influencing journalists' interpretations of political actions. Similarly, the responsibility of the EU for the crisis is discussed in German shows more in terms of a failed EU strategy, whereas the Russian debate stresses the EU's economic interests.

Considering the constructive and destructive quality of the frames, destructive frames prevail and legitimize confrontational rhetoric and actions in politics. In Russia, talk show discussions provide reasons for Russian intervention in Crimea and in Eastern Ukraine by blaming the Maidan protesters and the new Kiev government for anti-democratic actions and discrimination and by suspecting the West of following a geopolitical and economic strategy against Russia. Frames in German shows, in contrast, legitimize sanctions against Russia by denouncing the country for violations of international law. Destructive frames in both countries are in line with Cold War frames found in other studies on international crises (Nitsch and Lichtenstein, 2013; Pantti, 2016). In the Russian shows, frames that support Russian engagement in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine fit with the frame *Humanitarian Intervention* also known from previous research (Hammond, 2007).

Frames that follow principals of constructive journalism by providing solutions for identified problems and addressing deeper causes of conflicts rather than blaming one party are, however, found in both countries' talk shows. With reference to the Russian incorporation of Crimea and – in the German shows – to the Maidan protests, some of the frames call for de-escalation, negotiations and conflict resolution. They also include questions concerning each country's own responsibility for the crisis and its capacity to withstand an international conflict. For politicians, especially frames that explain the Ukraine crisis via great power politics and call for a multipolar global structure with more political de-centralization provide a basis to strive for peace agreements. This is also true for frames that emphasize the need to stabilize Ukraine as the primary goal.

However, as most of the frames deal with an attribution of blame, it might become rational for politicians to choose the easier path and adapt to this part of the debate by engaging in scapegoating, thus feeding the spiral of aggression. Concerning political talk shows that deal with conflict between competing positions on an issue but are important for distribution of frames in a country's media environment, the analysis demonstrates that the media are constitutive in the

creation of this heated atmosphere. With regard to further research on constructive journalism, the study demonstrates the importance to analyse both, the content of frames and their constructive or destructive character which together provide a clearer picture of lines of conflict and of possible compromises.

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1. The analysed shows are *Политика* (27 November 2013, 4 December 2013, 16 March 2014 and 5 March 2015), *Специальный корреспондент* (21 January 2014 and 8 April 2014), *Воскресный вечер с Владимиром Соловьёвым* (7 March 2014), *Список Норкина* (12 September 2014, 31 October 2014 and 12 December 2014) in Russian TV and *Anne Will* (5 March 2014, 16 April 2014 and 30 April 2014), *Maybrit Illner* (6 March 2014, 20 March 2014, 20 November 2014 and 26 February 2015), *Günther Jauch* (23 November 2014 and 15 February 2015) and *Hart aber fair* (17 March 2014) in German TV.

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