**From a Threatening 'Muslim Migrant' Back to the Conspiring 'West': Race, Religion and Nationhood on Russian Television during Putin's Third Presidency**

The major political shifts that have taken place during Vladimir Putin's third presidency have manifested themselves not only in actual policies, but also in official discourse, particularly the discourse of Russian nationhood. Since 2012, the very approach to the construction and dissemination of this discourse has changed substantially and its role in mobilising citizens in support of the regime has also undergone transformation. Major discursive shifts have been particularly clearly manifested in the news coverage on the two main state-controlled television channels, Rossiya and Channel 1, which constitute the most widely used, as well as trusted, source of information for Russian citizens.[[1]](#endnote-1) Television was assigned a central role in the dissemination of official discourse at the time of Putin's first accession to power, in 2000. This role only further gained in importance in the aftermath of the public protests which accompanied Putin's re-election in 2012 and in the context of the regime's subsequent controversial foreign policy actions. Hybrid regimes[[2]](#endnote-2) like the one in Russia heavily depend on popular support, and in its soliciting state-controlled broadcasting is a key tool. (Hale 2011; Petrov, Lipman and Hale 2014) As Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman put it, '[r]epression is not necessary if mass beliefs can be manipulated sufficiently by means of censorship, co-optation, and propaganda.' (Guriev and Treisman 2015: 4) But what are the mechanisms through which this manipulation occurs? The article addresses this issue by analysing the new ways in which state-controlled television has projected Russian nationhood during Putin's third presidency. It also considers the causes and potential consequences of this projection.

The article will demonstrate that during Putin's third presidential term the state broadcasters began disseminating crude narratives of ethnoracial identity, which link religion, culture and phenotype. Visual imagery is an essential element in the construction of these narratives. Previously narratives of this kind had been avoided. Complicating the wide-spread assumption that the annexation of Crimea in 2014 marked a distinctly new stage in the regime's reliance on Russian nationalism for the system's political stability, the article shows that particularly radical ethnoracial visions of Russian identity had been promoted by the state-controlled broadcasters prior to the events in Ukraine. This argument will be elaborated through an analysis of how the two main channels' news programs have been covering Russia's second major religion, Islam, and migration from 2012 onwards.[[3]](#endnote-3) Particular attention will be paid to the interpretative apparatus and framing techniques that broadcasters have been applying, showing 'how supporting features of the reporting discourse can influence the way in which covered events are understood.' (Fairclough 1995: 83 and Entman, 1993) Specifically the article will compare an anti-migration campaign that was waged by the state-controlled television channels between spring 2012 and autumn 2013 with the coverage of Europe's refugee crisis in 2015-2016.

***The Changing Political Context***

The construction of official discourse is strongly influenced by the strategies that elites choose to utilise in order to legitimise the political regime. During the first decade of the new millennium, when the legitimacy of the regime in Russia was primarily based on the government's ability to deliver economic improvements, the promotion of a powerful discourse of Russian nationhood was not central to the regime's legitimisation strategy. In this context, the Kremlin, as well as state-controlled broadcasters, preferred to maintain ambiguity regarding how to define the Russian national community. (Shevel 2011) On the two main television channels and in the pronouncements of top leaders, representations of the Russian Federation as above all the homeland of ethnic Russians were secondary to the depiction of the country as a state-framed multi-ethnic community, which historically had managed its multiculturalism more successfully than West European states. (Hutchings and Tolz 2015) Even though, as early as the first decade of the new millennium, liberal opponents of Putin's policies criticized his government for playing the Russian ethnonationalist card, at that time the top political leadership, as well as Channel 1 and Rossiya, in fact, demonstrated an appreciation of the destabilising potential of ethnonationalism in a multi-ethnic society, where different visions of the national community co-exist and compete in the public space. (Hutchings and Tolz 2016)

The changes in television reporting which began during the presidential election campaign in 2011 and intensified after Putin's return to presidency in March 2012 reflect the regime's new imperatives. Among them is the formulation of clearer consensual values within a context in which the social contract between the political leadership and society has begun to be based primarily on the issue of security -- the government's ability to successfully defend Russia from its multiple (perceived) enemies. Narratives about security threats necessitate identifying not only their sources but also the membership and the boundaries of the national community which is supposed to be defended. As a result, securitisation discourses, which amplify threat perceptions among the public and justify a concomitant increase of government interventions in public life, tend to be closely intertwined with and incorporate specific narratives of nationhood. This is reflected in the discourses of political leaders. The media also play a crucial role in fostering community affiliation 'generated by shared encounters with risk'. (Beck and Levy 2013; see also Gillespie 2007 and Gillespie et al. 2016) The developments in Russia from 2012 onwards offer an example of a specific form this global trend can take under a hybrid regime with predominant authoritarian tendencies.

Scholars tend to peg the turn on the part of the Kremlin towards the systematic utilisation of Russian nationalist narratives to the annexation of Crimea in 2014. In the words of Henry Hale, the annexation represented 'a bold stroke that for the first time made nationalism a centrepiece not only of Putin's own authority, but also the political system's stability more generally.' (Hale 2016: 222) In contrast, this article argues that the importance of 'the national question' for Putin's personal authority had already been articulated during his presidential election campaign, when in his manifesto article of January 2012 he made his first ever major pronouncement on the matter.[[4]](#endnote-4) It is true that Putin's article reiterated a somewhat ambiguous message about the nature of the Russian national community, trying to maintain a balancing act between the concepts of the state-framed Russian 'multi-ethnic and multi-confessional civic' (*mnogonatsional'naia i multikonfessional'naia grazhdanskaia*) nation and of the Russian Federation as the homeland of ethnic Russians. Yet in this article Putin stressed ethnic Russians' special place in the national community and promoted a rigidly hierarchical view of cultures to a greater extent than he had ever done before. Most importantly Putin's article highlighted the particular significance which the Kremlin began to assign to 'the national question' for maintaining the political system's general stability.

Correspondingly, the attention paid to the issue by the two state-controlled television channels has increased since the start of Putin's third presidential term. (Hutchings and Tolz 2015: 224) The approach to television reporting also began to change back in 2012. Channel 1 and Rossiya started launching well-orchestrated campaigns which offered viewers clear, simplistic messages about who belonged to the national community, who did not, and who the nation's significant Others ('enemies') were. Campaigns of this kind, which abandon any attempt to enact a 'staged pluralism' of opinion, were not a typical feature of the state-controlled broadcasting in the previous decade. (Hutchings and Tolz, 2015) Even before Putin's re-election, comparisons had been drawn between Russian television culture and media approaches of the Soviet era. (Oates 2007) From 2012 onwards, developments in the Russian media have been described, particularly by the Russian liberal opposition, as a 'return to the past' (*vozvrat k proshlomu*).[[5]](#endnote-5) Yet the comparison is deceptive.

Today, state-controlled broadcasters effectively use current global trends in media communication for state propaganda. Propagandistic campaigns of the current Russian regime have been run as a series of Media Events, in which the main role is allotted to broadcasters. According to the original definition by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, Media Events have a set of common characteristics. They unfold during the time of coverage, which becomes saturated. While they range across different types of media, the key role is played by the unique attributes of broadcasting, when cameras, microphones and various technological innovations lead viewers to feel as if they are active participants in the events. Media Events tend to include elements of high drama and have heroes and anti-heroes. (Dayan and Katz 1994).[[6]](#endnote-6) 'The reality effect' is thus dramatically enhanced compared to what took place during the Soviet period.

Dayan and Katz argued that integrating society was the main purpose of Media Events. However, critics of the original Media Event theory have pointed out that the 'integrative moment' of a Media Event should be researched, rather than presumed, and that power actors, namely those involved in orchestrating a Media Event, could be interested in constructing reality in a conflictual way, thus helping to reveal competing group interests and discourses. (Hepp and Couldry 2010). As we will see, both trends are at work in the Russian case. The broadcasters use Media Events to consolidate the regime's core constituency. At the same time, they contrast the purportedly conflictual goals and interests of those who at the time of the latest Russian presidential elections had began to be called 'Putin's majority' with various supposed 'internal enemies'.

The first example of the regime dropping earlier constraints on systematically and overtly playing a Russian ethnonationalist card was the Pussy Riot affair in 2012, when members of a Moscow punk group were accused of desecrating a Christian cathedral. (Hutchings and Tolz 2015: 194-220) State-controlled television turned a seemingly insignificant episode into a major Media Event, in the context of which a new ideological framework of Russia as a bastion of conservative traditional values began to be formulated, linking these values to Christianity. Christianity was defined as constituting the basis of European civilisation, of which Russia was part and which it was defending from an onslaught of various global forces, including the destructive liberalism of the contemporary West (*Zapad*). It was at times suggested that Islam and 'other world religions' also promoted positive conservative values;[[7]](#endnote-7) however, the Christianity-centred framing of the narrative inevitably led to the marginalisation of those peoples and communities that did not fit within the European/Christian framework. Overall, in the television coverage of the Pussy Riot affair a highly exclusive definition of the Russian nation as a community of Orthodox Christians was formulated and disseminated. (Yablokov 2014)

However, organizing broadcasting around orchestrated campaigns, in which a precise identity of the vilified Other changes regularly according to circumstances, makes it impossible to maintain continuity in the promotion of a particular vision of Russian nationhood in the long-term. During Putin's third presidential term, refugees and migrants began to occupy a particularly prominent place in the television coverage of events in Russia and in Europe. Their changing representations have been directly linked to the shifts in the television projection of the Russian Self.

The media globally tend to link together the issues of religion, migration, race and national identity. (Cere 2010; Campani 2001) And so many of the stereotyping and stigmatizing frames that Russian broadcasters have been using in their coverage of Islam and migration are those that circulate globally and, consequently, interviews with carefully selected Western politicians and anti-migration campaigners have been a regular feature of Russian television coverage. (Bayoumi 2006; Poole and Richardson 2006; King and Wood 2001; Said 1997) At the same time, the preference for narratives and interpretations which have capacity for a particularly radical othering and the lack of pluralism of opinion in many reports distinguish the Russian state-controlled broadcasters from their EU public service counterparts such as the BBC,[[8]](#endnote-8) suggesting that comparisons with the European tabloid media would be more appropriate. We will now turn to analysing specific Russian television campaigns.

***Racializing Islam and Migration: 2012-2013***

Between the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century and 2011, Channel 1 and Rossiya demonstrated relatively consistent and quite similar approaches to covering migration and Islam. Overall, the Kremlin's position that migration was essential for the Russian economy limited any critical assessment by the state-controlled broadcasters of social problems arising from migration in the country. In contrast, West European societies were at times presented on both channels as failing to mange multiculturalism, with the situation usually being blamed on their governments' unwillingness to invest sufficient effort into integrating migrants. Rarely, if ever, was Islam represented as a defining feature of the identity of migrants either in Russia or in Western Europe. Significantly, the coverage of the Manezhnaya riots in Moscow in 2010, which involved violent attacks on Russia's North Caucasian citizens, whom the Russian media called 'internal migrants', did not make any reference to the prevalence of Islam in the North Caucasus. (Hutchings and Tolz 2012) Overall, in line with the discourse of Russia's alleged multi-ethnic harmony, 'Russian civilisation' was portrayed as a product of the harmonious co-existence of Orthodox Christianity and Russia's own variant of Islam, which was moderate and peaceful. When drawing a distinction between Russia and the West, the broadcasters occasionally poured scorn on right-wing activists who campaigned against the 'Islamisation' of their societies. (Flood, Hutchings, Miazhevich and Nickels 2012: 102-128) To be sure, the coverage demonstrated a poor internalisation by the broadcasters of multi-cultural values and so an interpretative apparatus with the potential for othering and covert racialisation, such as the concepts of the 'clash of civilisations' and 'conflict of cultures', was at times utilized by the state-controlled broadcasters. This was, however, occasional, rather than systematic. (Hutchings and Tolz, 2012, and Flood et al. 2012: 162)

A dramatically different approach began to be adopted in the spring of 2012 with the launch by the state-controlled broadcasters of a tightly orchestrated anti-migration campaign. Run as a series of Media Events, the campaign reflected the specificity of the political context -- attempts on the part of the Kremlin's ideological machine to give an impression that, following public protests, the political leadership was responding to popular concerns. 'The Muslim migrant' seems to have been chosen by the broadcasters as the target, because opinion polls indicated a growing societal prejudice against people who could be lumped together under this umbrella term, with influential journalists sharing popular prejudices. (Tolz and Harding 2015: 463)

During this campaign, in a stark departure from the earlier coverage, Islam suddenly began to be singled out as *the* core identity of a wide variety of people both in Russia and in Western Europe. These included labour migrants to Russia from the former Soviet states of Central Asia, Russia's own citizens from the North Caucasus who happened to live outside their ethnic republics and were therefore labelled 'internal migrants', and residents in Western Europe of Middle Eastern and North African origin. In the process, a negative image of Islam was constructed, in which the previously maintained distinction between radical Islamism and Islam was erased. This campaign reflected the appropriation by the state broadcasters of isolationist Russian ethnonationalist narratives that, in the course of the preceding decade, had already developed an image of 'the Muslim migrant' as Russia's threatening Other. (Laruelle, 2010) So, television's anti-migration campaign represents the second example, after the Pussy Riot affair, of the regime's explicit reliance on exclusive forms of Russian ethnonationalism for mobilising societal support.

In the course of the television campaign, Islam was systematically racialized. In itself, this development was not unique. A growing racialisation of Islam in European and North American media post 9/11 has been widely analysed. (Eid and Karim 2014; Elver 2012; Poole 2011; Choudhury 2008) Racialisation of religion is a process through which certain phenotypical features associated with particular people in popular perceptions start to be directly linked with their religious affiliation. When Islam is racialized in the media coverage of migration, diverse people of different origins, including those who do not necessarily regard themselves as religious, are constituted as a single, homogenous group of 'Muslim migrant'. The group is represented through a visible archetype of 'the Muslim'. (Joshi 2006) The fact that the archetype is visible and relies on highlighting physical appearance justifies the use of the term racialisation, rather than other terms referring to inferiorisation and othering.[[9]](#endnote-9) A blanket ascription of this homogenous 'Islam' as *the* core identity of all migrants reinforces the process of racialisaion. It turns this constructed Islam into an immutable characteristic, which is represented by the media as being transmitted from generation to generation and as being the main obstacle to migrants' integration into the dominant culture of the host society. Television coverage foregrounds visual representations of difference with reference to skin color, dress and customs.

In 2012-2013, Russian state broadcasters offered an extreme example of this global trend. In its racialisation of Islam and ‘the Muslim migrant', Russian television used overtly biologising interpretative lenses of the kind the broadcasters had avoided before. In this coverage text and image were expected to work together in order to disseminate a particular message. Broadcasters' own prejudices, as well as their perception of popular attitudes, worked as a guiding principle in selecting visual images. For example, covering an incident in Moscow which involved North Caucasians, Rossiya's main Sunday news program *Vesti* *nedeli* of 7 October 2012 began by evoking theories of the controversial thinker, Lev Gumilev, who viewed ethnicities as biological entities. The report was placed first in the running order and was unusually long, lasting over 10 minutes. The moderator, a notorious pro-Kremlin celebrity journalist, Dmitrii Kiselev, whose authoritative voice introduces every *Vesti* *nedeli* report, made the following opening statement:

Gumilev compares the situation in which one ethnos aggressively invades the life of another with a metastasis and even with [the appearance] of helminths (*glisty*), which begin to live in another organism. Helminths, Gumilev notes, suck all the juices out of the body, while at the same time forcibly injecting it with their own hormones, thus changing the biochemistry of the host body.

The same processes happened in situations of 'harmful inter-ethnic interactions', the moderator concluded. Simultaneously, images of North Caucasians behaving anti-socially appeared on screen, leaving the viewer with no doubt as to who the 'helminths' in this account were. Typically for the reporting style of this television campaign, no alternative voices were included in the program. Instead all the participants, including the three North Caucasians, merely reaffirmed Kiselev's interpretation.

In the course of the campaign, the migrants' affiliation with Islam was systematically reinforced by visual images of women in hijabs and burqas or bearded men, whose facial features distinguished them from 'the indigenous European' (*korennye evropeitsy*). In the coverage which blurred the boundary between Islam and radical Islamism, reports on issues relating to migration were framed by representations of 'the Muslim migrant' as a threat to European, Christian identity and culture, by linking Islam to physical violence and violations of Europe's laws, and by representing Muslims as 'parasites' (*parazitiruiushie*) on Europe's social welfare systems. Significantly, in these representations, the earlier juxtapositions between Russia's multi-ethnic harmony and Europe's failed multiculturalism were abandoned in favour of drawing direct parallels between Russia's and Europe's problems with migrants. In this coverage, Russia tended to be represented as a state that shared with the rest of Europe the problems that 'the Muslim migrant' posed for security, economy and social cohesion. In comparison with the 'Muslim migrants' with their darker skin and peculiar clothes, 'Russians' were constructed as 'white', Christian Europeans.

The comparability of the situations in Russia and in 'the West' was underscored by the fact that reports on problems created by 'Muslim migrants' in Russia and in the EU directly followed each other in the news bulletins.

*Vesti nedeli*'s bulletin of 24 February 2013 is a telling example of the campaign's coverage. It started with a report titled 'The Islamic Expansion in St. Petersburg'. The background image against which the moderator Kiselev was filmed when introducing the report offered a stark vision of the Russian Self and its 'Muslim migrant' Other. The center of the image was occupied by an icon of Virgin Mary. On both sides of the icon stood groups of bearded men easily identifiable as 'Muslim'. In the foreground a figure of a man in a black mask represented a terrorist. Thus from the start, the notion of the Muslim migrant as both a security and a cultural threat to Russia as a Christian nation framed the report. At the end of the report the notion was reiterated for maximum effect with the final image of a street view in St. Petersburg where a small Church in the foreground was dwarfed by a large mosque at the back. The rest of the report was filled with visual examples of what the moderator called a 'creeping Islamisation' (*polzuchaia islamizatsiia*) of Russian cities. When showing what the report described as 'a Muslim prayer room' at a university in the city of Volgograd, Kiselev, observed: 'On the one hand, there is nothing wrong about this. On the other hand, a larva had been laid (*otlozhena lichinka*). Who can guarantee that radical Islamists will not grow out of it?' The racialisation of Islam was manifested here in the use of overtly biologising metaphors. The adjective *polzuchaia* (creeping) is commonly used in the Russian language to describe a snake; the reference to laying a larva suggests a comparison with an insect.

The news program then shifted its focus to Paris, implying that Russia and Western Europe shared similar problems. Provocatively titled 'Unknown France: The Fifth Republic Can Become Muslim', this second report in the running order included a visual representation of the French nation through a Christian reference -- the Basilica of Saint Denis in Paris. A stark juxtaposition with the Muslim Other was introduced straightaway by the background image accompanying the moderator's opening remarks. This was the image of a North African woman whose hijab was made out of the French national flag. Reinforcing the report's single interpretative frame of a 'Muslim migrant' as a threat to European Christian identity, the report included an interview with the president of the French National Front, Marine Le Pen, a regular commentator on Russian television during the campaign. Le Pen observed that if migration was not stopped immediately, 'France will soon become a Muslim country.' Visual imagery was selected to buttress Le Pen's comments, and included a lengthy filming of crowds of women in burqas on the streets of Paris and a group of praying men in a mosque. (*Vesti nedeli*, 24 February 2013)

Numerous other reports on migration issues in Europe also claimed that the sheer number of 'Muslim migrants' threatened Europe's Christian traditions. 'In many Scandinavian schools a fir-tree is no longer decorated for Christmas. Those who adhere to other religions could be offended,' Channel 1's main news program *Vremia* observed on 13 May 2013. Which 'other religions' were meant was made evident visually through the image of a woman in a burqa. In turn, London, according to *Vesti nedeli* of 27 January 2013, soon 'will be living under Sharia law'. 'In Britain, Muslims experience no visible restrictions... In contrast, some Christians believe that they are treated with much less tolerance.' Yet again, visual imagery of this gendered and racialized Islam was of women in hijabs and burqas.

In the coverage of Russia too, the hijab appeared as a symbol of the threat contemporary Islam purportedly posed to Russia's 'indigenous traditions'. In October 2012, during a controversy over the wearing of hijabs by schoolgirls in southern Russia, *Vesti* and *Vremia* agreed that the wearing of hijabs in school violated the secular nature of the Russian state and ran contrary to the historical tradition of moderate Islam in the North Caucasus that, in the past, was able to co-exist peacefully with Orthodoxy. (*Vesti nedeli*, 21 October 2012 and *Vremia*, 23 October 2012) The implication was that current practices of Islam that had become prevalent in Russia were no longer conducive to maintaining inter-ethnic harmony.

Indeed the coverage of the hijab controversy was often framed by linking Islam to violence. The man who led the campaign for the wearing of hijabs by the girls in his daughter's school was now imprisoned for disseminating extremist literature and possessing weapons, *Vesti nedeli* reported on 9 December 2012. In the coverage of events in Western Europe, Islam was also linked to violence, as was, for instance, the case at the time of the riots in Stockholm in May 2013. Rioting 'migrants', 'when clashing with the police, shouted "Allahu Akbar". This means that it is precisely Islam that has become their main marker of self-identification,' *Vesti*'s reporter argued. (*Vesti*, 27 May, 2013)

According to the channels, another sign of this failure of integration was the 'the Muslim migrant’s' reluctance to work. In discussion of this issue the most common description used by the broadcasters was that of a 'parasite'. This biologising metaphor goes back to the Soviet period, when in official and popular discourses people without work were labelled 'parasites'. In Europe overall, *Vremia* claimed on 17 May 2013, 'there is a problem with migrants who want equal rights but do not want to have equal responsibilities..., preferring their parasitic existence on welfare.' In this and other reports the visual image accompanying such statements was that of a large family with the father who was identified as a Muslim by his beard and the mother identified by her hijab. (See also *Vesti nedeli*, 2 December 2012, and 27 January 2013)

Overall, during the anti-migration campaign, the state-controlled broadcasters systematically used extreme language aimed at racializing Islam and migration through dividing the populations of Russia and Europe into clearly demarcated, internally homogenous groups, who simply could not live together -- the Christian population that was tolerant, law-abiding and hard-working, and visually different Muslim migrants, who were represented as un-integrated, violent, intolerant and 'parasitic'. Representations of Russia as a European society enhanced the power of the racializing worldview, while generating a sense that so-called Christian values were normative and Islam a threat. The conceptual apparatus used by the broadcasters was shaped by interlinked influences of a Soviet legacy of essentialised ethnicity and Soviet usage of biologising metaphors for defining the Other to be targeted (parasite and helminths), and of extreme versions of current global political and media representations of migrants and Islam as security, economic and social threats to host societies. Whereas coverage prior to 2012 tended to be marked by a 'staged pluralism' of voices, during the anti-migration campaign rigid monologism became typical.

During the anti-migration campaign, most of the reports adopted the same framing technique. Journalists tend to frame their reports at four different levels -- problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and remedy endorsement. According to Robert Etnam, at least two of these levels should be present in order to make the framing effective. (Entman 1993) During the anti-migration campaign, most individual news reports used all four levels of framing. The problem was defined as the 'Muslim migrant' posing a cultural and security threat to Russian and European Christian identities and nationhood; the cause of the problem was linked to Islam as the migrant's main loyalty and affiliation; any responsibility for the problem was entirely placed on the migrant; the solution was claimed to be in curbing migration and closing borders. Such a crude framing technique generally risks limiting the coverage's appeal, as only those *a priori* sharing particular perceptions are likely to respond positively.

Yet public opinion surveys suggest that anti-migrant sentiments could easily be exploited. A public opinion poll conducted in 2013 by the Russian polling agency ROMIR for the project 'Nation-Building and Nationalism in Today's Russia' at Oslo University found that only 16.6% of the respondents believed that Channel 1 and Rossiya exaggerated problems caused by migration, whereas 71.5% either praised the coverage or believed it downplayed the issue.[[10]](#endnote-10) The fact that the summer and early autumn of 2013 witnessed a significant increase in riots, which were interpreted by participants and the authorities alike as arising from inter-ethnic tensions between local residents and migrants (Pain 2013), prompted both channels to abandon such a provocative reporting style.[[11]](#endnote-11) The broadcasters' tendency towards overtly racializing Islam decreased, while overall attention to migration-related issues on the part of the broadcasters also temporarily declined.

***Russia, the 'West' and a Refugee Crisis: 2015-2016***

When in 2015 the channels again resumed their systematic reporting on migration in the context of Europe's crisis with refugees, yet another shift in coverage occurred. The new political context which directly influenced the broadcasters' approach to reporting was now shaped by Russia's role in the Ukraine crisis and the resulting confrontation with the EU and the United States. Particular coverage of the situation in Ukraine impacted on how the channels framed their reporting on other issues. The vilification of 'the Muslim migrant' had to be toned down at the time when the media spoke about how Russia was welcoming refugees from Ukraine and when the broadcasters claimed, against existing evidence to the contrary, that Crimea's pre-dominantly Muslim Tatar community overwhelmingly supported the annexation. (Hutchings and Tolz 2016: 331) As a result, the coverage of the refugee crisis no longer singled out Islam as the core identity of migrants and the root-cause of all migration-related problems. Broadcasters thus changed the ways of framing news reports as well as selecting visual imagery. Crowds of women in burqas and praying bearded men now rarely appeared on television screens. Yet, as we will see, visual gendering and racialisation of the migrant and the refugee continued.

The overarching representation of Russian identity also changed. Regular criticism of the Ukrainian leadership's supposed promotion of the exclusive ethnic, mono-cultural vision of the Ukrainian national community encouraged broadcasters to claim more often than had been the case in 2012-2013 that, in contrast to Ukraine, Russia's identity was multi-ethnic and multi-confessional. (Teper 2015) In this new context, the Russian national community was depicted as embracing people of different ethnicities and religious affiliations represented in the Russian Federation. Russia's reportedly proven ability to manage multiculturalism was again foregrounded and contrasted with the failure of the 'West' to achieve migrant integration. Whereas in Moscow, Muslims and Orthodox Christians together collected money for the building of an Orthodox Cathedral, in Europe 'open Islamophobia is, unfortunately, on the rise,' *Vesti*'s reporter argued. (*Vesti*, 18 January 2016, and 26 July 2015)

At the same time, order and stability emerged as the main frames for defining the Russian Self in comparison and contrast with social disorder in Western Europe. For example, text and image work together in the *Vremia* report of 31 March 2016 which is titled 'The Crisis of Migration and Its Lessons for Russia'. The very first sentence by *Vremia*'s reporter is that Russia is 'a place which is attractive to migrants'. The observation that they come to do useful work is reinforced by images of people working on building sites and cleaning Moscow streets. In the report, Putin appears as the main guarantor of order and stability. Putin's recent speech on migration issues, in which the contrast between Russia and the West in 'managing migration flows' is foregrounded, dominates the report, taking most part of the airtime. The end of the report visually reconfirms the vision of ordered and stable Russia, as migrants receiving work and residence permits in a government office are shown.

Overall, even though the coverage of the 2015-2016 refugee crisis has been neither impartial nor balanced, it indicates a return to the state broadcasters' earlier reluctance to systematically endorse the argument of isolationist Russian ethnonationalists that 'the Muslim migrant' constitutes the main threat to Russia's Christian identity. Instead, coverage of the refugee crisis has singled out the 'West' as Russia's main Other and the main threat to global security, from which Russian citizens are protected by its political leaders. A highly negative image of 'the West' embraces not only a critical assessment of the EU and America's foreign policy, but also representations of West European societies as ridden by unprecedented levels of internal conflict. The West's 'indigenous population' is no longer represented as a homogenous, law-abiding and tolerant community, but as deeply divided between those who have been naively welcoming refugees irrespective of the consequence for Europe's social cohesion, and xenophobic right-wing anti-migrant activists, whose violent actions highlight the hypocrisy of Western governments' discourse of liberal tolerance. Significantly, the coverage fails to acknowledge high levels of anti-migrant violence in Russia, implying that the problem is confined to the 'West' alone. Indeed, during the coverage of the refugee crisis, alleged inter-ethnic cohesion and harmony within Russia have been more unequivocally emphasized and more sharply contrasted to ethno-cultural conflicts in Western Europe than in the pre-2012 reporting.

The main narrative used by the broadcasters to frame the coverage of the refugee crisis has been of the responsibility of the West's foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa for creating the problem in the first place. This argument is repeated by the moderators and reporters, as well as reinforced by the Western experts and politicians who are interviewed by the broadcasters. On *Vesti* *nedeli* of 24 January 2016, a French interviewee, introduced as a sociologist and former political advisor to Nicolas Sarkozy's government, was depicted as stating: 'All these developments are a result of a huge mistake which the West made when it started to destroy the existing regimes in the Middle East, in such countries as Iraq and Libya.'[[12]](#endnote-12) Representing the West's foreign policies as the only cause of the refugee crisis, the program rhetorically asked in July 2015: 'Who could have foreseen that the boomerang would return so quickly and would painfully hit [Europe] in the forehead.' (*Vesti*, 23 July 2015; see also *Vremia*, 7 September, 2015) Russia's military involvement in Syria is not discussed in this context.

To be sure, in this coverage, 'migrants' have not received a particularly favourable treatment. Channel 1's *Vremia*, in particular, has repeatedly used crime as a frame for reports on migrants in Western Europe. (*Vremia*, 18 January 2016, 8 April 2016, and 12 March 2016) On several occasions, *Vesti* has employed extreme language to describe instances of the anti-social behaviour of migrants, comparing them with 'barbarians' who 'have just captured Rome'. (*Vesti*, 26 July 2015 and 10 January 2016) Migrants from the Arab world are accused of religious intolerance, leading to the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe, which is reported to be at a level 'unprecedented since the Second World War'. (*Vesti*, 24 January 2016) A link between migrants, refugees and terrorism has also been made. *Vremia* quoted the British tabloid newspaper the *Daily Express* as saying that 'over four thousand extremists from the "Islamic State" group have entered Europe under the guise of refugees.' (*Vremia*, 9 July 2015)[[13]](#endnote-13) Yet *Vesti* also noted that 'terrorists who call themselves the "Islamic State" have little to do with Islam as a religion.' (*Vesti*, 2 May 2016)

However, in this particular coverage, the main purpose of representing migrants and refugees is not in order to construct a particular image of the Russian Self as it was the case during the earlier anti-migration campaign, but in order to depict Western societies as being thrown into chaos by the policies of their own governments. The insignificance of migrants in themselves for the broadcasters' ideological message is underscored through the combination of text and visual images. For example, *Vremia*'s report of 8 April 2016 starts with the image of white bags, covering human bodies, being loaded from a ship. The reporter observes that the bags are with the drowned refugees and concludes that, in the past few months, there have been so many cases of their drowning that 'one stops distinguishing' between them. This immediately signals that the report is not about the terrible plight of refugees, but on the impact of the refugee crisis and migration on social cohesion and stability in Western Europe. Most images of the report are of violent clashes between local hooligans and right-wing extremists, migrants/refugees and the police, which the reporter says, recently took place in Paris. Other often repeated visualisation of disorder are dramatic scenes of arson. These are claimed to be public buildings which are set alight by rioting migrants or mosques that extremists want to burn down (*Vesti*, 26 July 2016). Significantly, in these reports race and gender have continued to play a role in defining the migrant and the refugee. Their new visual symbol has now become a young male with a darker or black skin. TV cameras dwell on their faces when depicting street clashes. At the same time, far fewer images allow specifically to identify 'the migrant/refugee' as Muslim. (*Vremia*, 18 January 2016; *Vesti* 26 July 2015 and 10 January 2016)

Germany has been represented as particularly torn apart by the issue of migration and as the main source of divisions over EU policies on refugees. 'Germany's Ministry of Internal Affairs announced that the number of neo-Nazi attacks on migrants in the country had grown six-fold in the past year-and-a-half,' *Vesti* reported on 26 July 2015. In turn, *Vremia*'s reporter observed:

German society is polarized. Everything is only black and white. Either you support migrants and you are applauded [by the federal government] or you are against them and so are a xenophobe. For several hours, in Dortmund, the police tried to prevent a clash between right-wing extremists and anti-fascists; in the meantime unidentified people set fire to a school where migrants, who had just been warmly welcomed at the railway station, were expected to be housed. (*Vremia*, 9 July 2015)[[14]](#endnote-14)

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, a leading critic of Putin's policies in Ukraine and supporter of EU sanctions against Russia, tends to be singled out as bearing a particularly significant responsibility for causing Europe's refugee crisis. *Vremia*'s reporter thus ended his coverage of how 'Europe's borders are tested by migrants':

Merkel is speculating on the ideal of a 'united Europe', putting her opponents into a position where they have to defend themselves. [She fails] to pay attention to the fact that her unshakable belief in the correctness of her position has caused a humanitarian catastrophe on the borders of the EU and a rise of crime inside it. The Schengen agreement is under threat, and 'united Europe' is split as never before. (*Vremia*, 29 February 2016).

Implicitly responding to the criticism in the West of Russia's human rights record, both channels have represented the treatment of refugees as an example of 'the violation of human rights on a mass scale' by the EU. (*Vremia*, 29 February 2016)[[15]](#endnote-15) In this coverage, migrants emerge not only as a cause of social and security problems in Europe, but as victims of the rising xenophobia of Europeans, which, according *Vremia*, is fuelled by the way Western media report on migration. For example, in its coverage of terrorist attacks in Brussels in March 2016, *Vremia* unusually gave a voice to a 'migrant' who seemed to have been critical of how the local media reported the attacks: 'All these terrible things are covered by television... Today my elder son has said he will not be going to school. Why? "Mum, we live in [the predominantly émigré] district of Molenbeek, maybe a bomb will explode in our school. They can take revenge on us!", [the son replied]' (*Vremia*, 23 March 2016)

Russia, it is suggested, does not suffer from the same internal destabilisation as EU states. (*Vremia*, 31 March 2016) Thus the narrative of purported social and political stability in Russia, which is deployed to convince citizens that the government is fulfilling its main duty of maintaining security, has been constructed by contrasting Russia with the EU. While ‘the West' has been criticized for its anti-migrant prejudices and Islamophobia, no such problems are acknowledged in relation to Russia.

***Conclusions***

During Putin's third presidential term, official discourse of the nation, disseminated by state-controlled broadcasters, has been assigned a more significant role in building constituency for the regime than had been the case before. These broadcasters have begun to articulate more radical, simplistic binary contrasts between the nation and its Others. In this discourse exclusive, including explicitly ethnoracial and gendered, visions of identity and nationhood often replace the earlier period's deliberately ambiguous definitions of the national community. In this shifting coverage, visual images have been playing a particularly powerful role in reinforcing racial and gender stereotypes, as well in underscoring either a similarity or difference between Russia and Western Europe.

This development is, above all, a result of the regime changing its legitimation strategy from economic performance to performance in the area of security. In the context of a decline in the population’s prosperity and when the regime has experienced a shock from mass public protests, dramatic representations of threats and a particularly strong vilification of perceived 'enemies' are hardly surprising. And thus the systematic promotion of Russian ethnonationalism for the purpose of achieving the regime's general stability can in fact be dated not from the time of the annexation of Crimea, but from that of Putin's re-election amidst public protests. Immediately following the protests, the goal of representing the authorities as attentive to public grievances in a society where opinion polls registered high levels of xenophobia prompted state-controlled broadcasters to use overtly ethnoracial definitions of the national community. Following the Crimea annexation, however, Russia's criticism of the Ukrainian government's alleged 'fascist' definitions of the Ukrainian nation inevitably made the broadcasters more cautious in using racializing frames to stigmatise particular ethnic or religious minorities inside Russia. In the depiction of the West, however, whose Othering post-2014 has intensified to the levels unprecedented in the past thirty years, overtly racialized representations of communities and individuals continue to be promoted.

Close links between security and specific visions of the nation are drawn in political and media discourses globally. And so Russian television coverage actively utilises narratives, interpretative concepts and media formats of global provenance. Thus Russian television campaigns around the Pussy Riot affair, migration, the Crimea annexation and Europe's refuge crisis combine elements of Soviet-style ideological campaigns with the global format of a Media Event. These campaigns reflect the greater involvement of the political leadership in determining the direction of state propaganda and a significant limitation of 'staged pluralism' during Putin's third presidential term.

Short-term, such coverage seems to have brought about anticipated results. Opinion polls suggest that the majority of viewers welcomed the anti-migration campaign.[[16]](#endnote-16) In turn, in 2015, negative attitudes towards the 'West' reached the highest levels in the post-Soviet era, with 75% of those polled by the independent Russian Levada-Center agreeing that the United States, Britain and Germany utilised every opportunity to undermine Russia's interests.[[17]](#endnote-17) Thus, television appears to be successful when it uses global media formats which are able to produce 'the reality effect' to disseminate the regime's ideological messages. Notably, these messages tap into historically well-established traditions of identity construction. Contrasting Russia to its Western 'Other' has been part of the discourse of Russian nationhood since the late eighteenth century, and narratives about a threat posed to Russian identity by the presence of large Muslim communities began to be promoted by Russian nationalist intellectuals from the 1970s. (Tolz 2001: 69-131, 148).

At the same time, some of the narratives and the interpretative apparatus which are utilised during the media campaigns have been of an extreme, inflammatory nature that previously had been avoided by these state broadcasters. Furthermore, abrupt changes of the precise identity of Russia's main 'Other' and resulting abrupt shifts in defining Russian nationhood create a paradoxical situation. Each campaign and each report, which didactically instructs the audiences what to think by foregrounding one particular interpretation through both text and image, produce ever more clearer and more coherent visions of Russianness than earlier. However, if assessed over the entire period since 2012, official discourse appears to be considerably more contradictory and fragmented. The approach adopted by the main Russian broadcasters is comparable to the activity of a marketing department which decides what 'brand' to promote on a particular occasion. Such an approach to nation image-making on the part of political elites is not unique to Russia (Dinnie 2008), but during Putin's third presidential term it has become particularly prominent. This approach has been studied by scholars mostly in relation to states' managing their image on the international arena, with the conclusion that such short-term tactics tend to be counter-productive (Anholt 2009 and Fan 2010) Similarly, instrumentally adopted sharp discursive swings of the kind we have witnessed in Russian television coverage since 2012 are unlikely to constitute an appropriate tool for societal consensus management and for the achievement of political stability long-term.

1. See, for example, the results of a national survey of May 2016 on the uses of the mass media in Russia, which was conducted by the All-Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion (VCIOM), [http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=115679](https://outlook.manchester.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?SURL=xxNa1GxQ1au44r6wvgYeq6z-9u0uKtIABOhdT-3lbBVs_ebEDXjTCGgAdAB0AHAAOgAvAC8AdwBjAGkAbwBtAC4AcgB1AC8AaQBuAGQAZQB4AC4AcABoAHAAPwBpAGQAPQAyADMANgAmAHUAaQBkAD0AMQAxADUANgA3ADkA&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwciom.ru%2findex.php%3fid%3d236%26uid%3d115679) (accessed 9 May 2016). Channel 1 is partially state-owned, whereas Rossiya is fully owned by the state. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Hybrid regimes are those that combine strong authoritarian traits with democratic ones (Hale 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For the analysis of the anti-migration campaign, the article draws on the database of *Vesti* and *Vremia* reports which was compiled as part of the 'Mediating Post-Soviet Difference Project' (see above). For a detailed discussion of the compiling principles, see Hutchings and Tolz, 2015: 41-45. For the analysis of the coverage of the 2015-2016 refugee crisis, the author used Channel 1 and Rossiya's digital news archives. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. V. V. Putin, 'Rossiia: Natsional'nyi vopros,' *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 23 January 2012, also available at www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1\_national.html (accessed 9 May 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See, for example, 'Vozvrat k proshlomu,' 29 May 2012, http://www.kasparov.ru/material.php?id=4FC49C5C35B59 (accessed 13 June 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. On the broadening of the range of coverage that can be seen as Media Events, see, for example, Hepp and Couldry, 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See, for instance, Putin's comments at a Valdai Club meeting in September 2013, 'Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba "Valdai",’ http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/19243 (accessed 9 May 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See, for example, a report assessing impartiality of the BBC coverage, including of migration, “From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel: Safeguarding Impartiality in the 21st Century,” June 2007, available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review\_report\_research/

   impartiality\_21century/report.pdf (accessed 9 May 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For an excellent summary of debates over the usage of the term racialization as a tool of scholarly analysis, see Murji and Solomos, 2005: 1-27. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. According to this ROMIR survey, 35.8 percent of the respondents thought that Channel 1 and Rossiya offered coverage which well reflected reality on the ground; and 35.7 percent believed that the broadcasters downplayed the scale of the problems. See, http://www.hf.uio.no/ilos/english/research/projects/neoruss/ (accessed 11 June 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Riots in Moscow's southern district of Bilyulevo proved to be a particularly important episode contributing to the restraining of anti-migration rhetoric on the two main television channels. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See also *Vremia*, 9 July 2015, which quotes a German politician as saying that the US should fund the resettlement of refugees from the Middle East, as its policies destabilised the region. It should be noted that it is often impossible to hear the actual words which are uttered by the interviewed Western figures. What they allegedly say is articulated by television reporters in the Russian translation. This, however, cannot be trusted, given the manipulation of information to which state-aligned journalists resort. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. The article which is referred to in this report was published by the *Daily Express* on 18 November 2015. http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/555434/Islamic-State-ISIS-Smuggler-THOUSANDS-Extremists-into-Europe-Refugees (accessed 17 May 2016). The report called the newspaper *Sunday Express*. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See also *Vremia*, 18 January, 2016, and 23 March, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See also *Vesti*, 7 January 2016, 22 January 2016, and 1 February 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See, http://www.hf.uio.no/ilos/english/research/projects/neoruss/. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. http://www.novayagazeta.ru/news/1697238.html (accessed 11 June 2016).

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