"Why Did MH17 Crash?"
Blame Attribution, Television News and Public Opinion in Southeastern Ukraine, Crimea and the De Facto States of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria

Gerard Toal

School of Public and International Affairs

Virginia Tech, National Capital Region

Alexandria, VA 22314

toalg@vt.edu

&

John O'Loughlin

Institute of Behavioral Science

University of Colorado-Boulder

Boulder, CO 80309

johno@colorado.edu

ABSTRACT

Shock events are often pivotal moment in geopolitics, and objects of intense disagreement among conflicting parties. This paper examines the downing of a Malaysian Airlines passenger jet over eastern Ukraine in July 2014 and the divergent blame storylines produced on Russian and Ukrainian television about the event. It then examines results of a question asking why did MH17 crash in a simultaneous survey conducted in December 2014 in six oblasts in Southeastern Ukraine, Crimea, and the de facto states of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria. Analysis of the surveys shows that blame attribution was driven more by television viewing habits than any other factor.

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On 17 July 2014 Malaysian Airlines (MH) Flight 17 was en route from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur when it was shot from the skies over eastern Ukraine. Two hundred and eighty three passengers and a crew of fifteen were killed. Travelers from ten countries died, including one hundred and ninety-three from the Netherlands. Below the plane's flight path a war between Russian-backed separatist rebels and Ukrainian government forces was in its fourth month. Rebel forces challenging Kyiv's control over its territory, including its skies, were losing ground. Days earlier their military formations had shot down a Ukrainian Air Force An-26 (14 July) and a Ukrainian Su-25M1 (16 July). In a comprehensive final report on the cause of the downing of MH17 in October 2015, the Dutch Safety Board, the group leading a technical investigation of the crash, found that the plane had been downed by a 9N314M warhead on a 9M38 missile launched by a Buk surface-to-air system.[1] Determining who launched the Buk missile was not within the remit of the Dutch Safety Board but was within that of a Dutch led Joint Investigating Committee (JIC). In late September 2016 they released a preliminary report based on extensive forensic analysis, audio intersections and over a hundred interviews with eyewitnesses and other informants. This concluded that flight MH17 was shot down by a 9M38 missile, launched by a Buk from farmland in the vicinity of Pervomaiskiy.[2] At that time, the area was controlled by pro-Russian separatist fighters. The JIC investigation demonstrated that the Buk had been transported from the Russian Federation and subsequently, having destroyed MH17, was taken back to the Russian Federation.[3] The Russian government maintains that no Buk ever crossed into Ukraine from Russia. Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova described the JIC findings as "biased and politically motivated."[4]

Before knowledge that a civilian passenger jet and not a Ukrainian military aircraft had been destroyed, a social media account associated with the Russian military adventurer Igor Girkin (nom de guerre Strelkov, or 'shooter') proclaimed that rebels had shot down a Ukrainian An-26 near Torez, along with the declaration: "We warned them - don't fly 'in our sky.'"[5] As soon as it became evident that a commercial passenger aircraft was destroyed, MH17 became the object of an intense struggle over blame attribution – the projection of blame onto certain actors and not others - between the warring parties in Ukraine, their regional allies, and the international community. (Strelkov's post was soon deleted). The violent death of so many civilians from different countries over a war zone

rendered what was supposed to be a local kinetic event in a military struggle into a worldwide media spectacle. Pictures and stories of the tragedy filled news programs and newspapers for the following week, and periodically thereafter as victim remains were recovered and the Dutch investigations got under way. Western-based free-lance social media investigators like Bellingcat drove much of the initial forensic investigation of the event.[6] On multiple media fronts, the conflicting parties vied to organize, control and channel the affect generated by the horrific incident. Central to this effort was the organization and framing of MH17 within ready-made blame attribution and victimization narratives, narratives that defined and gave meaning to the broader struggles over Ukraine.[7]

Narrative is the social practice of producing relatively coherent accounts of events, actors and motivations. Framing is the culturally shaped cognitive practice of classifying and particularizing that is vital to the creation of narratives.[8] This paper examines the contrasting blame attribution storylines that quickly congealed on Russian and Ukrainian television in the wake of the MH17 tragedy, and what survey respondents in Russia, contested regions of Ukraine (Crimea and six of eight contested oblasts in southeast Ukraine, hereafter SE6), and Russian-supported de facto states in its near abroad subsequently believed about why MH17 crashed. The emergence of clearly divergent blame attribution storylines, and their persistence, allows us to examine the degree to which television viewing habits, interacting with other socio-demographic, locational and political factors, accounts for variations in people's beliefs about MH17. Shocking and horrific events occur regularly in the course of violent conflicts. Like the genocidal killings around Srebrenica in July 1995, the MH17 tragedy is an instance of how conflicting parties and their state sponsors, with the television media under their control, produce self-protective bubbles of belief about shock events that reproduces geopolitical antagonism, regardless of forensic facts.[9] In the era of digital media ascendancy, where geo-locational data are more abundant than ever, truth is still a casualty of war but its death in controlled info-spheres is now more closely observed.[10]

This paper is composed of three parts. Part one briefly discusses shock events in international affairs and the research questions they present. Part two is an examination of the emergence of blame attribution storylines in the week that followed news of the

downing of MH17. Analyzing news coverage of MH17 by the most watched television stations in Russia and Ukraine, the paper documents how the downing of MH17 was initially presented to the public in both countries and to allied territories abroad. Part three of the paper then examines the degree to which these contrasting storylines of blame resonated with varying publics. Drawing upon results from simultaneous surveys in SE6, Crimea, Abkhazia, Transnistria and South Ossetia in December 2014 organized by the authors, the paper examines the relative support that different blame options received from respondents.

I. MAKING SENSE OF SHOCK EVENTS

World politics has always been marked by shock events that have distinctive geographies and materialities. The meaning of these events is never manifestly clear and often fiercely contested. Nevertheless, shocking events have historically created windows of opportunity for transformational political action and change. With the advent of television as the predominant source of international news for most publics, this contest is a multi-media struggle of conjoined sounds, images and narratives.[11] Shock events have many different forms. They can be singular instances of killing that slowly come to light (e.g. Srebrenica), violent revolutions (the denouement of Euromaidan), or surprising state power plays (the annexation of Crimea). Terrorist attacks are a distinctive genre of shock events, distinct from catastrophic natural events and accidents, in that they are planned and purposeful. Shocking events like the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, the Moscow apartment bombings of August 1999, the September 2011 attacks, the Beslan school siege of 2004, and the Mumbai terrorist assaults of November 2008 are examples of how catastrophic forms of terrorism become global media events, spectacles of violence with capacities to trigger affective storms of shock, anger and sympathy.[12] They also create well known opportunities for the consolidation of power by those in positions of authority.[13] Horror has its uses.[14]

Airplane crashes are a genre that defy easy characterization for they can be accidents or purposeful cases of terrorism (as with 9/11 or the downing of Pan Am flight 103 in November 1988 by the Libyan government). The crash of TWA flight 800, a passenger aircraft that exploded on 17 July 1996 after takeoff from New York, was initially

considered a terrorist attack until an investigation determined that a fuel tank short circuit was most likely to blame. In some cases, the destruction of passenger airlines can be considered purposeful military actions but there are also tragic cases of mistaken identity (e.g. the downing of Korean Airlines 007 by a Soviet Su-15 in 1 September 1983 or the destruction of Iran Air Flight 655 by the USS Vincennes on 3 July 1988).[15]

In considering disputes over the meaning of shock events we need to consider at least six salient features of such incidents. Here, due to space limitations, we can merely note each briefly. We see evidence of all six in television coverage of MH17.

1. Affective Images

Shock events are, by definition, affective spectacles where images play a key role in triggering and inducing affective contagion.[16] Affective contagion has the capacity to widen existing political cleavages, deepen political polarization and accelerate the eclipse of politics by war. Television news programs face choices about what to show and what not to show of the event. Protocols and editorial decisions, for example, about whether to show the bodies of human victims of the event vary. Shocking images can so radicalize viewers that evidence-based discussion of events next to impossible. Context and non-proximate causality are easily forgotten. As visual storytelling, television video production can link different events across time and space through montage editing. It can also produce animated and virtual reality visual reconstructions of events, thus powerfully shaping interpretation and blame attribution.

2. Availability, Analogy and Assimilation

Shock events are ruptures in the everyday routine reproduction of 'common sense' about the world, dislocations in the seemingly natural discursive order. They can induce dissonance and openings in geopolitical cultures that were previously closed off for discussion and debate.[17] How these events are analogized to other events in the past and how hegemonic narratives adjust to accommodate and represent shock events are important questions in any research project on their operation and impact. A key mechanism here is what some psychologists term 'availability bias,' the presence and supply of similar instances from the past and the operation of familiar modes of

representation and narration.[18] These allow potentially rupturing events to be assimilated back into prevailing regimes of 'common sense' or not.[19]

3. Authority and Expertise

The role of figures represented as authorities in determining the meaning of shock events is considerable. Administrative and expert status, projecting legitimacy, is crucial. In authoritarian societies, the leader of a country is the chief storyline setter. State-funded media tend to follow the lead of the country's power center. If power centers are plural and the media less beholden to the state or private actors, there is likely to be greater scope for divergence between the official government narrative on shock events and media representations. Experts have a different type of authority, one grounded in technical knowledge, subject-matter mastery, cultural capital and a presumption of objectivity. Comportment, dress, titles and background imagery convey this to television viewers. Whom are deemed expert and whom are enabled to speak authoritatively in that role in public, especially on television, is a process that is conditioned not only by cultural and social factors but also by editorial decision-making. Who is entrusted to decide and direct what the public sees is shaped by power structure and cultural habitus.[20] What is presented as authoritative and objective, however, may be viewed by suspicion by certain socio-demographic groups for whom 'mainstream media' are part of a conspiracy to hide 'the truth.'

4. Blame Attribution and Agnotology

Blame attribution can take many forms. It can be a direct and concentrated attribution of an event to a singular actor. But it can also be a much more indirect process where attribution is not concentrated on a singular target but diffused among a series of alternatives. The first form generates a clear story, or counter-story (an alternative account), about the event. In the second process, however, the effect is to generate a counter-story that muddies attribution. Instead of clarity, there is confusion and uncertainty. Many different actors and means could have downed MH17. The picture is unclear and we may never know who is responsible for what. Critics of Russian communication strategies argue that Russia's goal is not to create self-serving alternative

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narratives but to create sufficient confusion and uncertainty about narratives that blame Russia.[21] This form of attribution drifts towards agnotology, namely the social and political production of ignorance. Used to describe corporate campaigns to deny causality and create confusion (e.g. on tobacco and global warming), this concept has similarities to what is known as disinformation (*dezinformatsiia*) in (counter)intelligence work.[22]

5. Conspiracy Theories

A conspiracy theory is a style of interpretative heuristics the explain events and practices by reference to the machinations of powerful actors who conceal their role to dupe regular people.[23] This style of reasoning is ostensibly populist but is easily appropriated by powerful actors. In societies characterized by high levels of distrust of or contempt for official institutions, conspiracy theories can be vehicles for that distrust and discontent. The disruptive impact of the internet on traditional media, and the rise of personalized expressive social media has created an unregulated and open communications ecosystem for conspiracy theories to spread and flourish. Indeed, considerable research in psychology suggests that human cognition processes are 'biased' towards cognitively miserly thinking; conspiracy theories are thus attractive and appealing, especially in times of turmoil and crisis.

Conspiracy theories flourish when professional standards of journalism are compromised, and trust in traditional authority is low. Politicians as well as state and oligarch controlled media can be conspiracy theory propagators if it serves identified interests.[24] As a widely-recognized mode and style of reasoning, conspiracy theory needs to be treated as a category of practice rather than a scholarly concept. The frame itself is part of the discursive struggle of blame attribution and avoidance.

6. Materialities of Shock Events

Shock events, as noted, have their own materialities and contingencies as events. Catastrophic events have structural, proximate and physical causes, as well as multidimensional material impacts and ruins. Weapon systems have physical characteristics, material capabilities and visual signatures. These pose distinctive technoscientific challenges to investigators and those seeking to control the meaning of

these events. In the course of investigations, certain material objects and traces may take on iconic status, and may act in ways that defy the meanings being imposed upon them by the contesting parties. Bow-tie-shaped fragments unique to the Buk-M1's 9N314M warhead made its identification possible: hundreds of fragments were lodged in the bodies of the aircraft's pilot and first officer. A side skirt mark along with a poorly obscured unit designation number (32) helped Bellingcat researchers provided 'fingerprint' identification of the precise Buk vehicle that shot down MH17. Research needs to be sensitive to the challenges of the technoscientific process of identifying and measuring the materialities of shock events, from the forensics of crash investigation to the recovery and painstaking identification of human remains.[25]

II. TELEVISION NEWS FRAMES & BLAME ATTRIBUTION

MH17 was a global media event that was front page news worldwide in the week that followed. We provide an illustration of the narrative framing that developed in the first week of the event by contrasting the MH17 coverage by the two most popular channels in Russia and Ukraine. According to television ratings for 2014, *Perviy Kanal* (First Channel) in Russia and *Inter* in Ukraine were the most watched channels in each country.[26] Neither channel is free of controversy or accusations of bias. The Russian government controls the board of directors of *Perviy Kanal* and the station is widely seen as a vehicle for the communications agenda of the Kremlin. *Perviy Kanal* is the successor to Russian Public Television, and more broadly to well-known Soviet television programs, most notably Central Television's authoritative evening news program *Vremya* (Time), first broadcast in 1968.[27]

The controversial Ukrainian oligarch Dmytro Firtash has a controlling stake in *Inter* television.[28] While it presents a Ukrainian perspective, Ukrainian language activists consider it insufficiently Ukrainian because of its reliance on Russian language programming (its news programs are also in Russian). In September 2016 the offices of the station were firebombed and subsequent blockaded by Ukrainian militia activists. They accused it of pursuing a "pro-Russia" agenda.[29]

We concentrated on the evening news broadcasts of each channel, available in an archive of broadcasts on each channel's website. We have divided the week of broadcasts

into two categories, the first 100 hours of the event (four days) which are dominated by the materiality of the crash and its victims, and the second half of the week which featured the presentation of an official Russian counter-story at a Moscow press conference on 21 July. A week after the crash two rival storylines on MH17 were well established within Russian and Ukrainian geopolitical cultures. MH17 is a centrally contested event within the Ukraine crisis, an object of intensive information war on multiple media platforms.[30] This paper is no more than an introduction to the opening rounds of that war and it effects in various locations.

The First 100 Hours: Perviy Kanal's Vremya.

MH17's last contact with air traffic control 13:19:56 UTC.[31] Radar images show the aircraft rapidly losing altitude at 16:20 local time in Ukraine (17:20 Moscow time). News of the crash was first reported in two brief segments on *Perviy Kanal*'s 19:00 hour program *Vechernie Novosti* (Evening News).[32] The 21:00 television news program *Vremya* on *Perviy Kanal* was the first with sustained coverage of MH17. The broadcast began with distant local amateur video and photographs of the wreckage.[33] Correspondent Alexandr Evstigneev, reporting by phone, presented an on-the-ground account of what happened according to local separatists. They claimed that a Ukrainian Su-25 fighter jet shot down the passenger aircraft and that they subsequently shot the SU-25 down.[34] A news analysis segment immediately after by Maxim Semin presented a series of "facts" for interpreting the event.[35] In a home office interview, Oleg Smirnov, head of civil aviation commission at the Russian Federal Service for Supervision in the Sphere of Transport (*Rostransnadzor*) in the Ministry of Transport, declared that the rebels in eastern Ukraine only have mobile shoulder-held ground-to-air missiles (so-called MANPADS which are effective up to 5,000 meters). He claimed they do not have weapon systems capable of destroying a passenger jet at higher altitudes. Semin then cited an ITAR-TASS report that the Ukrainian military moved Soviet produced "Buk" anti-aircraft missile systems into the Donetsk region prior to the downing. Further, Russia's Ministry of Defense indicated that no Russian warplanes were flying near the border of Ukraine. Semin's report reminded viewers that the Ukrainian military shot down a Russian Tu-154 airliner in October 2001, with the loss of all 78 lives on board. Ukraine initially denied its military was responsible. Footage of former

President Kuchma from 2001 reacting to the accident as well as video of the wreckage and subsequent investigation accompanied Semin's commentary. Despite initial denials, Semin explained, the Ukrainian authorities were later forced to admit that their missile had indeed destroyed the plane, and that they were at fault. The first close-up video footage of a wreckage site, featuring still smoldering fires, wreckage, human body parts and scattered personal effects, was shown thereafter.

The information indirectly inferring that Ukraine was responsible for the downing of MH17 was repeated by other correspondents and experts over the subsequent hours and days. Further claims about the poor training and expertise of Ukrainian military were made.[36] To this indictment using selective and misleading facts was added a speculative conspiracy theory.[37] Over footage of the smoldering remains of the aircraft, the presenter announced that the presidential airplane of the Russian president Vladimir Putin, not MH17, may have been the "real target". Citing an Interfax source in the Russian Federal Transportation Agency, the broadcast declared that both planes crossed flight paths near Warsaw, had similar contours and coloring, and, from a remote distance, were virtually identical, according to Interfax.

The following night's broadcast featured some on-the-ground eyewitness stories as well as interviews with local separatists who claimed that a Ukraine jet had downed the aircraft.[38] It also reported on the statement by Russian President Putin which, after expressing his condolences to the victims, noted that "this tragedy would not have occurred if there were peace in that country [Ukraine], or in any case, if hostilities had not resumed in southeast Ukraine." Putin then directly allocated blame to Ukraine by virtue of the location of the accident: "And certainly, the government over whose territory it occurred is responsible for this terrible tragedy."[39] A range of experts appeared on the evening news show and detailed threatening statements, military deployments and possible explanations (poor training, confusion, aging missile stocks) for why Ukraine shot down MH17.[40] The broadcast also amplified the blame attribution made by Russia's Ambassador Vitaly Churkin before the United Nations Security Council.[41] A section of Churkin's speech featured him rhetorically asking why Ukrainian air traffic controllers directed the aircraft into a war zone. He declared that "ensuring the security of civilian aviation in a State's airspace is that State's responsibility. The State over whose territory a

flight is planned must provide the information necessary to ensure the safety of aviation."
In a section not shown he also complained about artillery and mortar shelling by the
Ukrainian military into Russia: "We consider those provocations acts of aggression on the
part of Ukraine against Russian citizens and against its sovereign territory. We place all
blame on the Kyiv authorities and call for the Ukrainian side to take decisive measures to
prevent such incidents in future."[42]

The broadcast of sections of statements made by Russian government officials was
featured alongside a series of background reports that sought to contextualize the event. In
an eight-minute video segment correspondent Pavel Pchelkin asked who benefits from the
crash of MH17.[43] The segment is a montage of conspiracy theorizing that begins from the
premise that there is a nefarious purpose behind the downing of the aircraft: "While the
perpetrators of the tragedy are not yet known, and the investigation has not yet begun,
seemingly unrelated events in different parts of the world in the past and the present are
lining up in a picture that can explain much."[44] The downing "happened just as the EU
summit began in Brussels to decide the fate of sanctions against Russia. And suddenly a
plane of Malaysian airlines crashes near Donetsk. The smoke coming out of the crashed
airplane had not yet died down when President Poroshenko confidently stated: this is a
terrorist act." The segment features excerpts from an interview with Mikhail Delyagin,
director of the Institute for the Problems of Globalization. He declared:

> It's clear that this is a great way to blame everything on the rebel militia. They shot
> down passenger airplane at an altitude of 6.5 kilometers. That's great. It means you
> [the rebels] have this technology [Buk], and now we'll blame all on you, and at the
> same time, on Russia. Therefore, I think, it is a pure provocation by the Ukrainian
> Nazi junta. But the real masterminds are Americans, because, I'm sorry, but
> Poroshenko, or Kolomoisky aren't clever enough for this.[45]

Before the EU summit, it is alleged, the majority of EU states were against tough economic
sanctions, especially in the energy sector, since these were painful for Europe. The United
States, however, sought to break apart Europe from Russian energy supplies. Mere
symbolic sanctions against Russia did not serve "the plans of the American strategists, who
are behind all the actions of Kiev after the February coup." Thus, as another featured expert

(Konstantin Simonov Director General of the National Energy Security Foundation) explained:

> It is certain that, what happened in Ukraine is an attempt to separate Russia from Europe. In fact, the U.S. plan is to prevent a union between Europe and Russia, and instead, make Europe depend exclusively on the United States. The energy sector is the most important part of our relations with Europe. If this link is cut, then of course, we will have difficulties in other directions as well.[46]

This rupture had not happened, however, while rebel forces were proving difficult for Kiev to eliminate. Strategists in Kiev and Washington, thus, "urgently needed a propaganda breakthrough that could radically change the situation." The downing of MH17, however according to Simonov, allowed the Americans to say to the Europeans that Russia was a terrible country and that the Donetsk Republic was like a branch of the evil empire. The narrator Pchelkin explained: "The further the story develops, the more the experts suspect that the special services are behind the tragedy, and clearly not the Ukrainian special services. This is the signature of a slightly different country. It's an American signature." This claim was then consolidated by a video montage of Cuban missile crisis images and document quotation which suggested that the US sought to create a very similar catastrophe as a pretext to invade Cuba. That Putin was returning from a BRICS summit that very day was seen as significant. According to Pchelkin, their refusal to use the dollar as a reserve currency was a catastrophe for that currency. Washington, Pchelkin concluded, cannot accept Russia's growing role in the world, its energy deals with Iraqi Kurdistan and Argentina. Russia was now a serious global player and "all the evidence suggests that Washington is ready for the most radical measures to discredit Russia."

This conspiratorial mode of reasoning was a feature of similar reports on *Perviy Kanal* in the days following the disaster. The Ukrainian government was condemned for its desire to immediately pronounce separatist rebels guilty of the downing. Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov stressed that "political attempts to play on the tragedy, to immediately identify the perpetrators" were incorrect.[47] He listed ten questions that the Ukrainian military had to answer, questions that insinuated that the government in Kiev was hiding information to serve its interests. A long video report (12:43) on 20 July asked viewers the 'who benefits?' question again (implicitly cueing conspiratorial reasoning),

with eyewitness testimony and video framed by the assertion that experts were sure it was a premeditated provocation because Ukraine needed to discredit the rebels.[48] It was "no coincidence" that Poroshenko subsequently called on the world to consider the Donetsk and Luhansk republics as terrorist organizations. The report reviewed claims made by Ukraine about the incident and presented arguments that (supposedly) refuted these claims: released rebel recordings claiming MH17 were doctored voice files; former miners and now rebels were incapable of operating such advanced weapons as the Buk; neither a Buk system nor any other Russian military equipment crossed the state border into Ukraine, according to a statement by the Russian Defense Ministry. This report featured a cut-out style animation of a jet being tracked (vector wave graphics) and then attacked (red dot vector graphics) by two Ukrainian Buk weapon systems. *Vremya* viewers, in other words, were shown Ukrainian missiles destroying MH17.[49]

In another long video segment (8:22) that same night entitled "Conspiracy Theory – who tries to use the pain of others for their own purposes" correspondent Pavel Krasnov argued Kiev's quick judgement on the MH17 disaster and "confident tone leads to suspicion."[50] "This indicates that they shot it down and as they realized that they shot it down, now they are trying to get out of this situation quickly," explained a test pilot (Ruben Yesayan) interviewed for the segment. Re-using video clips of interviews with Simonov and Delyagin, Krasnov explained that "the script of this game was written a long time ago, and according to it, Russia was obliged to get involved in the Ukrainian conflict, giving the West an excuse to show her a red card." In US politics "they know all too well how to organize provocations with the benefit for themselves." Colin Powell's "white powder tube" forgery at the United Nations (justifying US intervention in Iraq), the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the effort to blame Cuba for attacking a passenger airline, even the late nineteenth century blaming of an explosion on the US ship *Maine* on the Spanish: all are examples of US provocations to launch wars. "116 years ago, the Americans began their expansion into the world with provocation, killed 250 of their citizens and fought under the call of "Remember the *Maine*," explained Delyagin. The West remembers the shooting down of the South Korean Boeing in 1983 but not the Ukrainians shooting down the Siberia Air jet in 2001. Now "the catastrophe has repeated, and Ukraine, apparently, will again deny its involvement, even if there is undeniable evidence."

In these reports we see examples of the six themes identified above. The shock of MH17 is quickly assimilated into pre-existing blame narratives through a series of strategies. Capacity and intent are projected onto Ukraine. The 2001 analogy points to Ukrainian culpability. A series of "experts" present "facts" that steer blame away from Russia and the Donbas separatists. An anti-American bias, longstanding from Soviet times, is mobilized as available heuristic to locate MH17 within a rich history of US foreign policy provocation and perfidy. These strategies reinforce the general Russian government line on the Ukrainian conflict: it is all the fault of Ukrainian nationalists and their American backers.

The First 100 Hours: Inter's Podrobnosti

Inter has an hour-long evening news program called *Podrobnosti* (Details) at 20:00. Its broadcast of 17 July began with phone reports from correspondents.[51] The initial visual signature of the downing was an amateur eyewitness video of a plume of black smoke in the distance. The broadcast noted Girkin's social media boast of downing an An-26 and also cited social media posts by residents of the Torez area noting the movement of military vehicles, including a Buk missile system, through the area.[52] An aviation expert (Sergey Plotnitsky) interviewed declared that a Buk system could have brought down the aircraft as could have an air-to-air missile. Later in the broadcast the program reported President Poroshenko's statement at a Ukrainian National Security Council meeting: "This is not an accident, not a catastrophe, but an act of terrorism." At the end of the broadcast, the program displayed a social media photograph of a Buk moving through what it identified as the town of Snezhnoe. The anchor declared that, according to the US television station CNN, Washington had irrefutable evidence that the missile that shot down the Boeing was fired from the territory of Russian Federation.

The following night's broadcast featured considerable visual footage of the wreckage of the airplane, and of grieving relatives in the Netherlands and elsewhere.[53] Human body parts were blurred in the footage but this blurring and the scattered personal effects of the victims were visual signatures of the loss of life involved. Some of the footage was shown in silence. The broadcast focused on audio recording released by the Ukrainian Secret Service (SBU) of rebel leaders, described as "terrorists" in all broadcasts, discussing the transfer of the Buk. It featured a short segment on "absurd Russian propaganda," the

attempt to fake a social media entry by one of the passengers confirming that Ukrainian fighters are next to the Boeing.[54] Reports from various world capitals highlighted the international reaction amongst politicians to the tragedy. *Inter*'s correspondent in Amsterdam noted the resignation of a US journalist Sarah Firth from RT (the Kremlin's English language broadcaster) in protest against editorial directions on how to cover MH17 ("the truth is more important"). In a report on German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the correspondent was openly critical of her conciliatory policy towards Russia.[55] A report from Washington highlighted the condemnation of the rebel groups by UNSC ambassadors from France and the United States.[56] A report from Moscow began with the anchor asking *Inter*'s Moscow correspondent Dmitry Elovsky if "all Russians believe the official propaganda?" The report filmed Moscovites placing flowers at the Dutch Embassy to express their horror at the event and sympathies for the dead. Among them was Putin-critic and historian Andrei Zubov who expressed great embarrassment at what was happening in Ukraine. Another figure interviewed was the Russian writer Viktor Shenderovich who commented on how the MH17 tragedy had "spawned monstrous and senseless lies. Russia continues to be in a tailspin, in denial of reality."[57]

Subsequent evening broadcasts chronicled the considerable international condemnation of Vladimir Putin in the European and US press. The London correspondent showed the blunt headlines in the British tabloid press about the tragedy, such as the *Daily Mail*'s headline "Putin Killed My Son." A report highlighted the Russian propaganda effort to divert blame for the tragedy onto Ukraine even to the extent of changing the responsible party from self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic "terrorist" to the "Ukrainian military" on the event's Wikipedia web page. Correspondents noted the strong statements of condemnation from various prominent politicians (new British Defense Minister Michael Fallon, US Senator John McCain). Reports chronicled the alleged effort of rebel leaders to collect the plane's black boxes to give them to Moscow not the OSCE. Accusations that rebels were restricting access to the crash site and manipulating evidence were also broadcast.

Russia's Public Relations Offensive on MH17

On 21 July the Russian Ministry of Defense held a press conference on MH17 for the international media in its new operations theater. There were two presentations at the press conference. The first was by the head of the Main Operations Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces General Staff Andrei Kartapolov.[58] His presentation was an elaboration on the already existing information strategy of the Russian military on MH17, namely to present so-called objective data and to pose interrogating questions of the Ukrainian military, inferring its guilt in the process. Ukraine, he asserted, had three or four air defense battalions, equipped with Buk surface-to-air missile systems, in the area on the day of the crash. "What was the purpose of deploying such a large set of air defense systems near Donetsk?" Kartapolov presented a series of images that inferred that Ukraine was the responsible for downing MH17. One was an image of MH17 within the range of the nearby Ukrainian Buk systems. Another was a collection of black and white satellite photos showing Ukrainian air defense systems and a battery of Buk missiles in the vicinity. The final two images show the same location with the Buk missiles deployed on the day of the crash, and then an empty field some days later. A chart of Ukrainian radar activity designed to show its intensity on 17 July was also presented. All of this 'circumstantial evidence' was designed to bolster the claim, which Kartapolov does not state directly, that a Ukrainian Buk surface-to-air missile shot down MH17.

Kartapolov then built a similar circumstantial case for a second theory of Ukrainian guilt, namely that MH17 was downed by a Ukrainian Su-25 jet. He stated Russia's monitoring system registered the presence of a Ukrainian jet, "probably a Su-25, climbing and approaching the Malaysian passenger aircraft." Kartapolov asked rhetorically: "What was a military aircraft doing on a route intended for civilian planes?" To corroborate this inference of Ukrainian guilt Kartapolov turned the presentation over to the head of the Main Staff of the Russian Air Force Lt. Gen. Igor Makushev who presented a four-minute flight monitoring video taken by the Russian air traffic control center in Rostov. The video showed MH17 descent but also a new "airborne object" that appears at the spot of the aircraft's destruction (this is highlighted with a cursor in the unfolding video images). Air traffic control requested information on the object but was unable to get any reading on its parameters, "most likely due to the fact that the aircraft was not equipped with a secondary radar transponder which is typical of military aircraft." Makushev then explained that this

aircraft subsequently hovered over the MH17 crash site (this, in actuality, was a widely-scattered series of sites). Ukraine claimed none of its military aircraft were in that area at the time of the crash. "As you can see," Makushev concluded, "that is not true."

Kartapolov ended the press conference by challenging the US to release the data it claimed proves that the rebels shot down MH17. "The information we have presented here is based on reliable and objective data from various technical systems. The same cannot be said for the unsubstantiated accusations against Russia." Russia, he stated definitively, "has never provided the militia with Buk surface-to-air missiles."

The press conference was covered extensively on *Vremya* that night and subsequent nights. An initial video segment weaved together the technospeak of the Ministry of Defense officials with a ground level witness (Tatyana) who asserted she saw two planes that day. "There were three explosions, three claps. We thought they are bombing us. Then one plane fell, burned, and the second went to the side, to Dnepropetrovsk."[59] One interviewed expert, Sergey Grinyaev, General Director of the Center of Strategic Studies and Forecasts, speculatively blended the two theories inferring Ukraine's guilt into one. The Malaysian plane was shadowed by fighter jets and after the Buk system had unsuccessfully fired at it, "the fighter jets destroyed the already damaged plane so that the script would go according to the original plan." In a follow-up segment the next evening, the press conference was described as providing "clear" and "irrefutable evidence" linking Ukraine to the MH17 tragedy.[60] Various experts explained that Ukraine's non-closure of the air space indicated they knew the separatists did not have any Buk systems, that it is possible to disguise a launch site (Ukraine could then blame the rebels for the missile they launched), and that either of the two Russian theories of the downing were strong possibilities. A seven minute plus video segment by correspondent Mikhail Akinchenko concluded: "Summarizing all the facts, some experts believe that the Malaysian plane was sentenced. Military aircraft in the air and "Buk" on the ground only duplicated each other." Yet juxtaposed to this blame allocation by experts was a declaration of non-judgement: "So far, one can only speculate about the details of the tragedy, so it's too early to draw unambiguous conclusions."[61]

The Russian Ministry of Defense press conference was ignored on *Inter*'s *Podrobnosti* on 21 July. Yet, strangely, many salient images from the press conference

appeared for 42 seconds as background to a standup report by the Moscow correspondent (Dmitry Elovsky) on Putin's midnight address the night before.[62] The broadcast was dominated by international reaction to the MH17 tragedy. The Berlin correspondent's report was on German newspaper reporting on the possibility of sanctions.[63] International correspondents reported statements by President Obama who declared that it was time for Russia to take responsibility for the tragedy and by British Prime Minister Cameron that "the whole world is watching Putin."[64]

The following evening (22 July) a short segment (1:34) on *Podrobnosti* briefly addressed one Russian theory about MH17.[65] In it the program anchor declared that even Russian experts rejected the Kremlin's version of the aircraft's destruction. The evidence was an interview clip taken from RBC TV (Russia's only 24 hour business channel) in which an aviation expert (Vadim Lukashevich) pronounced the claim that a Su-25 could shoot down a plane at an altitude of 11,000 meters as not serious.[66] Like the "generals with many stars" during the Soviet Union justifying the downing of Korean Air 007 in 1983, Lukashevich declared that "they have their explanations but the truth will eventually come out." The anchor then reported that Russian pilot-hero Sergey Nefedov (pictured with a medal) termed the Defense Ministry's version complete nonsense designed for internal Russian consumption only.[67] In this way, Russian "experts" were used to refute Russia's MH17 storyline.

Subsequent *Podrobnosti* reports on the following evenings chronicled the material effort to remove human remains from the crash site as well as international diplomacy at the United Nations and elsewhere.[68] An audio recording in which Vostok battalion leader Alexander Khodakovsky admitted that separatists received and returned a Buk missile system was the subject of a brief video segment a week after the crash.[69] No feature segment, however, directly deconstructed the two Russian theories on MH17. These were ignored or dismissed as propaganda and lies. Instead the statements of Western leaders, and the Western press, were used to affirm and amplify the Ukrainian government's position.[70]

Table 1 summarizes the different blame allocation narratives presented by *Perviy Kanal* and *Inter* in the week following the MH17 tragedy. In these news reports we can trace how the event and its images come to be enveloped by analogies and storylines that

	Perviy Kanal	*Inter*
Whose is to Blame?	Ukrainian military forces	Russian government Pro-Russian separatists
Initial Salient Facts	Rebels only have MANPADS. Ukraine moved BUK to area. Russian jets not flying in area.	Girkin's social media posting, subsequently deleted.
Initial Privileged Source on the Event	Rebel sources indicating Ukrainian Su-25 shot it down.	CNN reporting photograph of BUK in rebel area.
Initial Conspiracy Theory	Real target Putin's plane	
Analogous Event	Accidental downing of a Tu-154 in October 2001	Soviet Air Force downing of Korean Air in 1983
Russian MoD Theory	Either SU-25 shot it down or Ukrainian controlled BUK.	'Russian propaganda'
Controlling Force	United States	Putin; the Kremlin
Geopolitical Meaning	US wants to block Russia's growth and power in international affairs.	Russia wants to ruin Ukraine

Table 1; Contrasts in blame allocation according to *Perviy Kanal* and *Inter*

assimilated it into pre-existing common sense. On Russian television MH17 is another example of Ukraine trying to shirk its international responsibility (like with Siberia Airlines in October 2001). Political authority figures and chosen television "experts" suggest that the United States was behind events, using provocations to further its geopolitical interests. Conspiracy and agnotology go together in the Ministry of Defense press conference. To *Inter* the MH17 downing was another example of its victimization at the hands of Russia and its terrorist proxies in the Donbas. Both Western and Russian authority figures and "experts" attest to their culpability. The materiality of the MH17 downing – video footage, social media images, black boxes, destroyed fuselage, dead bodies, secret recordings and various investigations – has extended its life as an event into the present day. It remains an ongoing subject of contestation between Russia, Ukraine and the international community.

III. PUBLIC OPINION ATTITUDES ON WHAT HAPPENED TO MH17

　　Given the fact that Ukrainian and Russian television consistently broadcast powerfully divergent storylines on what caused the downing of MH17 throughout 2014, it

is worth examining what impact this 'information war' had on the attitudes of ordinary residents in parts of Ukraine, Crimea and de facto state territories directly supported by the Russian state. How important were television viewing habits in shaping how people explained why MH17 crashed? What role did socio-demographic factors, like nationality, education, gender and income, or other factors like political orientation, political trust and location have in shape people's understanding of MH17?

In the last weeks of July 2014, the independent Russian polling agency Levada Center asked respondents in the six largest Russian cities about MH17. The polling firm methodology followed their usual random sampling strategy but more than one response could be given to the question (though only a small number of interviewees chose this option). Levada asked: "Have you heard about the July 17 crash of the Malaysian plane in the sky over Ukraine and, if so, why, in your opinion, did this plane crash occur?"[71] Note that the word phrasing is not a direct question about who is to blame. Instead it posed a question about causality that may or may not involve the allocation of blame to particular actors. That most responses translate into blaming particular actors is itself an important finding. More than 4 in 5 respondents explained the crash by blaming the Ukrainian military (46% to an anti-aircraft missile of the Ukrainian army and 36% to a Ukrainian air force plane). Only small numbers attributed it to the Donbas militia (3%), a terrorist attack (2%), an accident on board (1%), pilot error (1%), and the Russian military (1%). Other diverse explanations were provided by 6% of the sample while 16% indicated that they could not give a reason for the loss of the plane.[72] Denis Volkov of Levada Center noted that 94% of Russians get their news from television and that this has created a different reality where "there are different theories, different history, different images, which equate the Ukrainian forces with fascists."[73] These Levada ratios are displayed in Figure 1 for comparison to our results for the other 5 sites.[74]
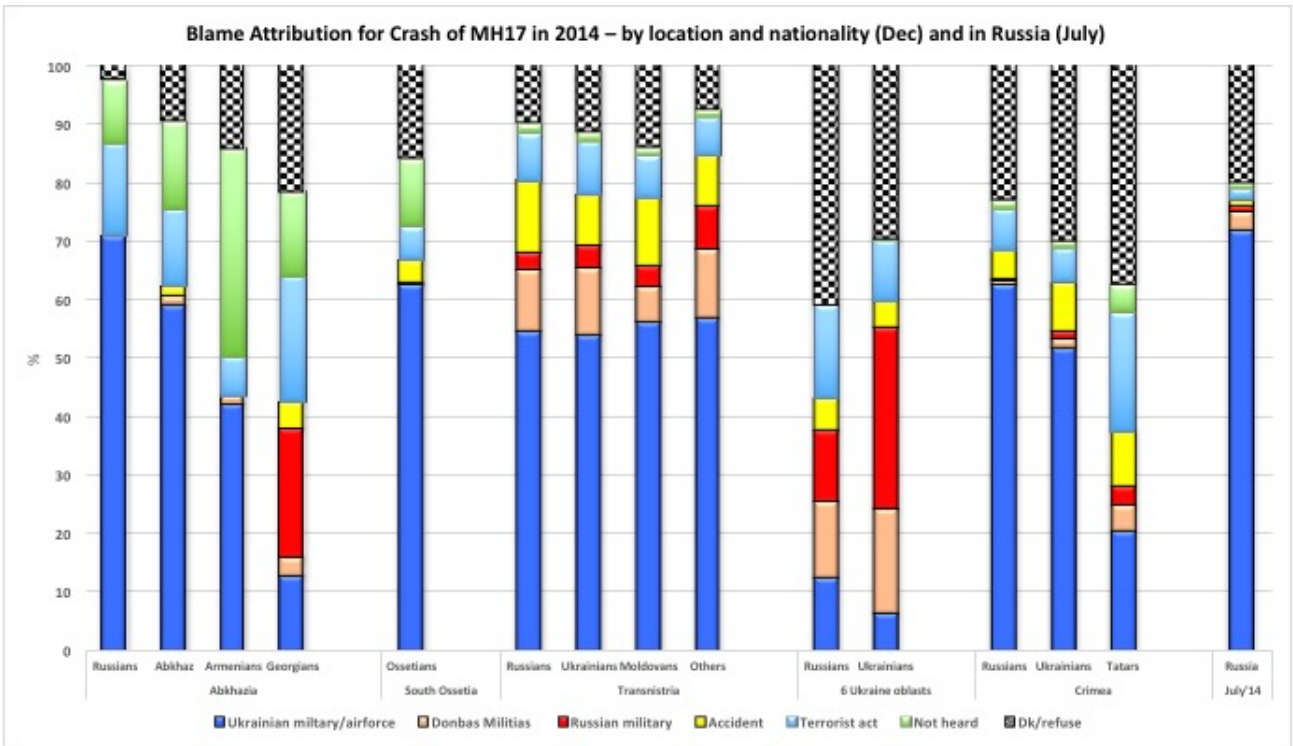
Figure 1: Proportional responses to questions about the shooting down of MH-17 in the sample sites (December 2014) and in major Russian cities (July 2014) by major nationalities. The question was framed as a closed one in December while the July survey by Levada center (Moscow) in Russia offered respondents an open option. The December survey used the answers from the July survey as prompts.

Five months after the Levada poll, we asked the same question on MH17 in five other regions - in six oblasts of Southeastern Ukraine (hereafter SE6), in Crimea and in the three Russian-backed 'de facto' states of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria. The question was one of about 125 questions asked in a wide-ranging study of the impact of the Maidan protests, the Crimean annexation and the Donbas war. A suite of socio-demographic and ideological questions enables cross tabulation of the answers.[75] The MH17 explanation question allows us to probe the relative impact of television habits on causal attribution while at the same time considering the effects of socio-demographic and ideological predictive factors. Most importantly, the simultaneous administration of the same survey questionnaires in the five sites in late December 2014 allows us to estimate the differential effects of television station access, post-Soviet experiences and local contextual politics. The MH17 catastrophe was a catalyzing event in widening the divergences between the

post-Maidan Ukrainian government and its Western supporters, on one side, and the Putin government and its attendant regimes in Crimea and the de facto republics, on the other.

The Eurasian de facto states are the products of separatist wars of the early 1990s entangled with the collapse of Soviet power. In the post-Soviet independent states of Georgia and Moldova, anti-government forces in the small autonomous regions of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria eventually prevailed with the backing of Russia. (We do not consider Nagorny Karabakh here). Russia has recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states while public opinion in Transnistria is favorable towards annexation to Russia. In all three de facto states, the vast majority of residents want Russian troop currently stationed there to remain permanently or until the situation 'stabilizes.'[76] All three are strongly dependent on Russia for economic aid and direct subsidies of their state functions.

Survey Design and Predictors

We survey contested regions that include Russian-supported de facto states, the annexed Crimean republic and the Ukrainian territory adjacent to the active war zone oblasts in the Donbas. The timing of the survey was crucial as events on the ground were shifting quickly and diplomatic negotiations were underway regarding a ceasefire for the war in the Donbas. This timing requirement meant that the survey be conducted at the same time in all sites as potentially new shock events could lead to different responses if the survey was delayed in one or more regions. The simultaneous survey was managed by KIIS (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology) for SE6 Ukraine and by the Levada Center (Moscow) for Crimea, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria. Coordination between the two polling companies and sharing of the questionnaire while following the well-designed sampling procedures allowed the completion of the surveys in the last two weeks of December 2014. Respondents in SE6 Ukraine were offered a choice of either Ukrainian or Russian and elsewhere were in Russian. All interviews were in-person, door-step format by local interviewers, and followed standard interview ethical protocols (explanation of the research, anonymized responses, right of refusal, etc). The total number of respondents was 4833 (SE6 Ukraine 2033, Abkhazia 800, Tranistria and Crimea 750 each, and South Ossetia 500) with the response rate varying from 41% in SE6 Ukraine to just over 75% in

Crimea. With an average time of completion of 52 minutes, the survey contained 127 individual questions organized into three sections: demography (29 questions), a geo/politics section (80 questions), and region specific section (about 8 questions). The margins of error in the respective samples range from 2.5% to 4.5%.

Our selection of predictors was based on four expectations of how respondents would answer the question about the MH17 crash. Our general approach as indicated by the emphasis on the respective TV broadcasts is to understand how television habits influence blame attribution by respondents. To highlight this factor, we need to control for other possible explanations, which are included as predictors in the model though we do not give them substantive attention. First, we considered socio-demographic backgrounds and included 8 predictors in the model from this category. Self-defined nationality as Russian and Ukrainian were both included since these two groups are most directly involved in the private and public discussion about the fate of MH17. We expect educational status to be related to interest in and information about the event so we included both low educational status (less than high school) and high educational status (university degree or higher) in the model. We also considered age to be a key element - age 35 and under is the post-Soviet generation while age 65 and over are typically pensioners who spent most of their lives in Soviet times and for many of whom the post-Soviet period has been a time of economic difficulty. We included gender as a control variable since other work has shown men take stronger stands on positions regarding conflict and perceived external aggression.[77] We include an income effect using the category "we can only afford food" and worse as the measure of low income. Typically, individuals in this latter category are generally less interested in geopolitical and public affairs and more concerned about daily material needs.

A second set of predictors measures political and ideological orientations. Two variables directly concern interest in international politics (we use "not interested" as our measure) and self-placement on a 10-point ideological scale from far-left to far-right (we use "left of center" with a score of 1-4 as our measure). In related work on the Caucasus and de facto states, we have seen that attachment to the self-identified ethnic group is an important indicator of a range of opinions about other groups and accordingly we include it here ("Very proud" is our measure on a "very proud" to "not at all proud" scale as all

groups show high level of ethnic pride). Since Vladimir Putin is the face of Russian foreign policy, we add an indicator of support for his policies as a key predictor ("Yes" to the question that asked if the respondent trusted the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin).

We consider attitudes about the ongoing conflict over borders and sovereignty in Ukraine and earlier conflicts in the de facto states as important elements informing a view about the fate of MH17. In an April 2014 survey in 8 oblasts in Southeastern Ukraine, including the war zones of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology had asked respondents if they were willing to resist invaders. In their sample, 21% were "willing to put armed resistance" to any Russian troops entering Ukraine.[78] We repeated this question and use a "yes" answer as an indication of strong patriotic beliefs. While the survey settings are in multiple countries, all of them are potentially future war zones dues to unsettled borders, and territorial preferences and claims. We add an interactive term of Ukrainians and "willingness to fight" to account for the particular war circumstances in Ukraine at the time of the survey.

A third set of predictors revolved around post-Soviet material circumstances. Has the end of the Soviet Union helped or hurt respondents and what is the balance between material and political preferences? As in many of our previous studies, the well-used question about the Soviet legacy ("was the end of the Soviet Union a right or a wrong step?") underlies many other beliefs about the past twenty-five years of economic and political dislocations.[79] We expect those who believe that the end of the Soviet Union was correct to be more favorably disposed to current territorial arrangements and we also add a variable specifically asking about future economic prospects ("Will you live better in two years time?") to measure economic optimism. A third measure in this category of explanations asks respondents to evaluate material interests against territorial arrangements. It asked respondents to agree or disagree with the statement that "It does not matter in which country I live as long as I have a good salary and pension". Our variable "good salary" indicates those who agree or strongly agree with this sentiment.

Our fourth category of predictors is most closely connected to the main argument of the paper about the divergent conspiratorial nature of the explanations for the crash of MH17. It comprises five measures of television watching habits. We identify respondents who watch more than 20 hours of television per week, those who trust television news and

those for whom television is their main information source. We also identify those who watch television from Russia broadcasters. Finally, we added an interactive term of Ukrainians and "trust television news" to identify those Ukrainians who would be most likely to accept the explanation coming from the Poroshenko government. Lastly, we add a dummy variable - residence in SE6 Ukraine - to characterize respondents who do not live in the Russian information space, that is, Russian controlled (Crimea) or Russian dominated (de facto states) sites.

Summary Statistics

Our question repeated Levada Center's July 2014 question so answers are directly comparable across the regions of interest. The comparative percentages are displayed in Figure 1. The main comparison is blame attributed to Ukrainian forces versus those to the Donbas militants and its Russian supporters and the multiple categories are collapsed into 7 major options for display. Because there are big differences between the nationalities, the ratios are displayed for the main groups in each location. On the graphs, the SE6 Ukraine sample (both Russians and Ukrainians), Georgians in Abkhazia and Tatars in Crimea are the exceptions since elsewhere a plurality (Armenians in Abkhazia) or majorities of the respective nationalities place the blame on Ukrainian forces for the aircraft downing. Values most similar to the over-whelming blame attributed to Ukrainian forces by urban Russians in Levada's July 2014 survey are seen in Transnistria (all three groups), Russians in Abkhazia, Ossetians and among Russians in Crimea. Exceptionally, Georgians in Abkhazia (20%) and Ukrainians in the SE6 part of the country (just over 30%) attribute significant blame to Russian forces. Only in SE6 Ukraine (both nationalities) and 'others' in Transnistria (a mixed group) show more than 10% to the Donbas militias.

It could be argued that asking "why was MH17 destroyed" is a potentially sensitive political question, one with a manifest 'politically correct' answer. Whether this was the case or not is difficult to determine. What we can say is that, in keeping with our findings on other potentially sensitive questions in these Black Sea-Caucasus locations, groups who feel marginalized or alienated in their regional settings show high ratios of 'don't know' answers out of an abundance of caution. The extreme ratios - over one-fifth of Georgian respondents in Abkhazia, Russians in SE6 Ukraine (over 40%), Ukrainians in SE6 Ukraine

(30%), and one-third of Tatars in Crimea - are higher than the one-fifth ratio in Russia. It is also possible that many of the respondents of Russian nationality that generally support the Kremlin position believed that it was Russian forces or Donbas militants who shot down the plane but decided against revealing their opinion to interviewers because it did not affirm their usual geopolitical preferences.[80]

By pooling the 5 samples, we can gain insights into the factors that led people to come to their decision about who was to blame for the downing of MH17. By including a predictor in the model that defined the residence of respondents as either in SE6 Ukraine or not, we can see the importance of the contextual factor that has been argued by geographers as an element that can influence respondents' attitudes.[81] We drop respondents who refused to answer the question about MH17; we also drop respondents whose personal characteristics are not available since they either refused to answer a specific question or provided a 'don't know' response. These 'missing cases' result in 3339 respondents in the statistical models.

Model of Blame Attribution for the Crash of MH17: The Role of Television

We have summarized the dramatically contrasting blame attributions put out by Russian and Ukrainian broadcasters in the aftermath of the shooting down of MH17. In the statistical modeling, we keep the focus on the role of television by highlighting its contribution to the reasons respondents gave for the destruction of the plane. We chose multinomial logit as our preferred modeling approach since it allows examination of circumstances with more than two discrete outcomes. In these cases, the choice of a comparator is important for interpretation of the coefficients. We collapse the number of blame options to five by creating the comparator from combining the two more neutral options - "it was an accident" and "it was the result of a terrorist act." Respondents who chose these options are not specifically opting for Russian, Ukrainian or Donbas militant forces but neither do they avoid the ascription of blame by choosing the 'don't know' option. In the multinomial logit modeling, we present the four comparisons - Ukrainian forces (air force, army or volunteer groups), Russian forces, Donbas militants and the "don't knows" to the accident/terrorist act comparator.

We present a graphical display of the results in Figures 2-5 rather than the coefficients for the 26 variables. We convert the values from the multinominal logistic regression into average marginal effects for clarity of display and identification of the significant factors in predicting the choice of blame attribution. Marginal effects are calculated from predictions of the model that was fit for each of the 26 predictors by averaging their values and integrating over the remaining variables. Average marginal effects can be interpreted as the probability for a unit change in the variable of interest holding the other variables constant. Standard errors are represented by the vertical lines and when the 95% error estimates cross the zero line, the predictor in that model is not significant. All of the modeling was completed by the 'mlogit' command in STATA 14.

The interpretation of the average marginal effects is straight forward. For example, in Figure 2, the average marginal effect for the "trust Putin" predictor is .196 with a small standard error estimate. It is highly significant and indicates that those who trust Putin are 19.6% more likely to blame Ukrainian forces for shooting down MH17 compared to those who do not trust Putin, holding other variables constant.
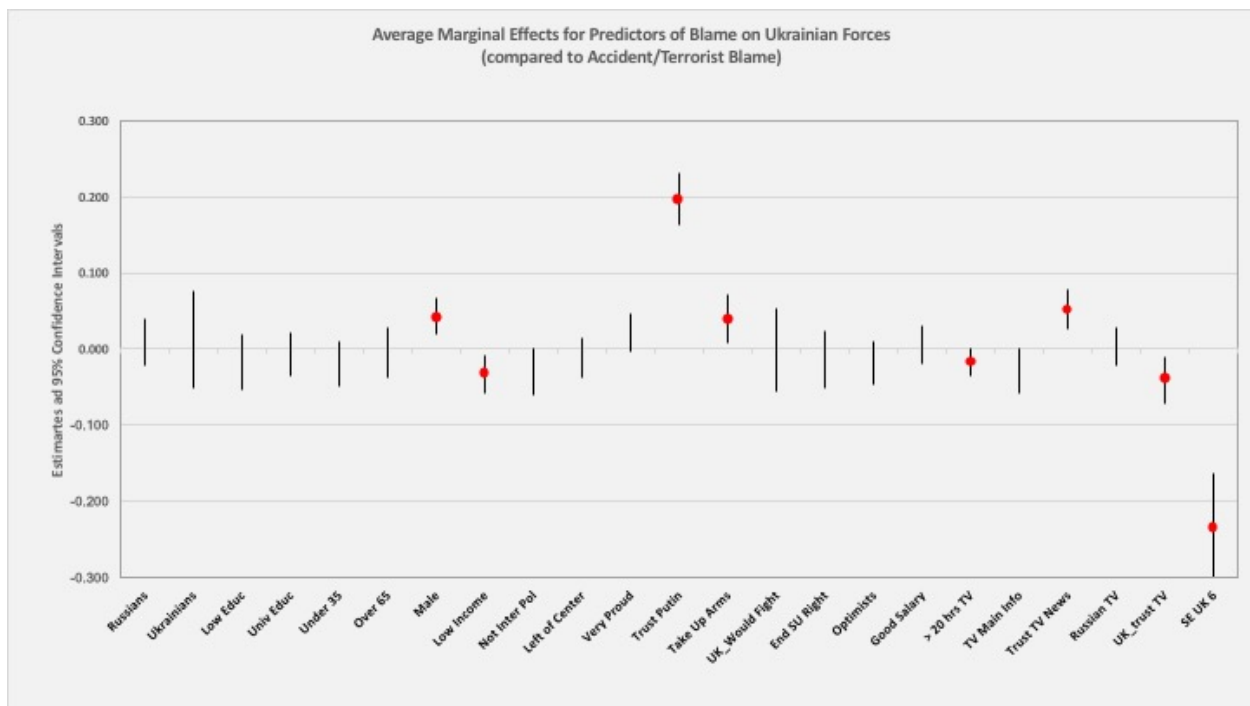
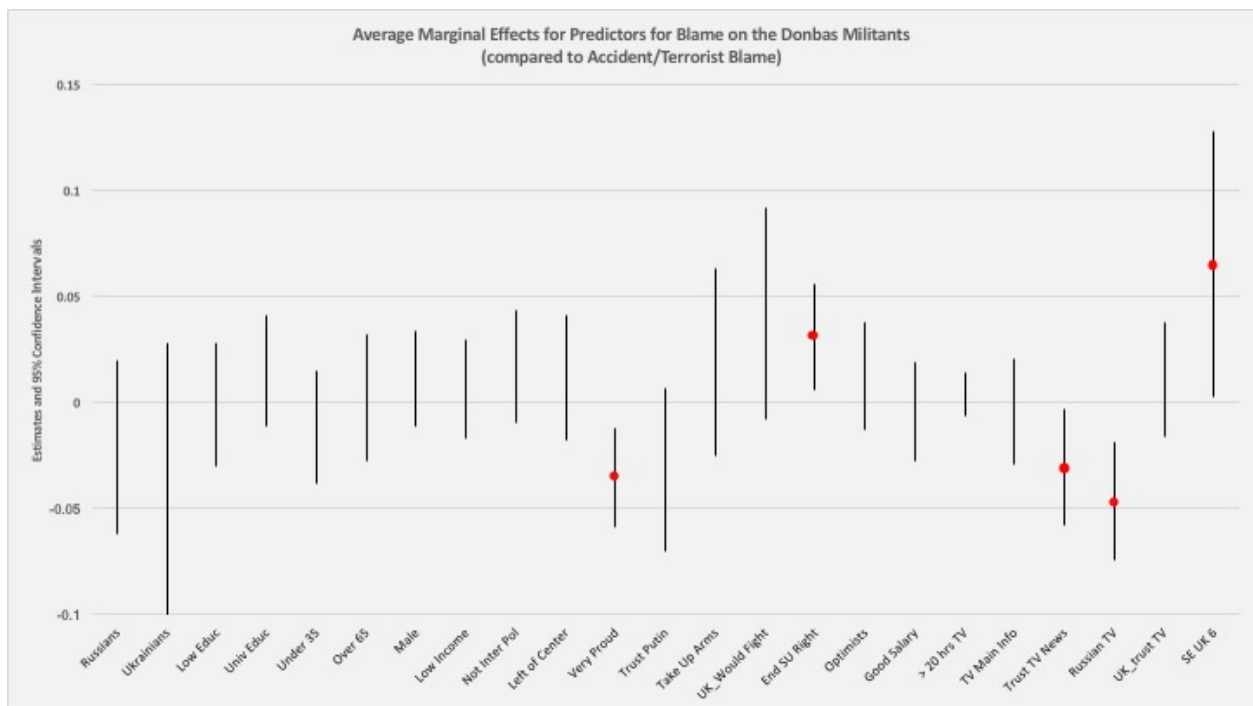
Figure 2: Average marginal effects of individual predictors for blame to Ukrainian forces for theshooting down of MH-17, compared to the respondents who gave "terrorism" or "an accident" as an explanation. Red circles indicate significant differences from the comparator and the vertical lines indicate the error ranges of the estimates

We consider the demographic variables as controls in this analysis and do not devote much attention to their coefficients. Few of these variables show any significant relationship with any of the four blame attributions. It should be noted that there are significant numbers of Russians and Ukrainians in Transnistria and Crimea, as well as in SE6 Ukraine. Russians might be expected to have different interpretations about the cause of the MH17 crash because of differential exposure to local television stations, as well as broadcasts emanating from Moscow. But there is insignificant variation among these sub-populations by study site. On the four graphs of the average marginal effects, the relative positions of the estimates for both Russians and Ukrainians are very similar.

For blame attribution to Ukrainian forces, two predictors with opposite effects stand out on Figure 2. Significant more blame (19.6%) is attached to Ukrainian forces by those who trust Vladimir Putin while significant less blame (23.3%) is directed to these forces by residents in SE6 Ukraine (compared to those who live in other survey sites). Given the debate about the causes of the MH17 plane crash and the key role that Putin played in its immediate aftermath, these values are expected. In all but the last model, that for the 'don't know' blame category, residency in SE6 Ukraine is highly significant (i.e. living within a Ukrainian state information sphere). That survey site is generally closest to the location of the MH17 disaster in Donetsk oblast, certainly in perceptual space as part of Ukraine on whose territory the plane came down; the television and other media in Ukraine gave a great deal of attention to this event and the ongoing war in the Donbas on the border of our SE6 survey site oblasts (Kharkiv, Odesa, Mykolaiv, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson and Dnipro). The effect of this locational factor is visible in all of the blame attributions (Ukrainian, Donbas or Russian forces), after controlling for the individual personal characteristics of the respondents. Two small but significant negative effects (for those who watch more than 20 hours of television per week at 1.7% and for Ukrainians who trust TV news at 4%) show less ascription to Ukrainian forces and two small significant positive effects (for those who would forcibly oppose an invader by force at 3.9% and for those who trust TV news at 5.2%) are also visible in Figure 2.

At the time of the surveys in December 2014, neither the Dutch Safety Board nor the Joint Investigative Committee had released reports on their findings. Yet circumstantial

evidence was growing that suggested that a Buk surface-to-air missile system transported from Russia to territory controlled by the Donbas separatists was the culprit in downing MH17.[82] The Donbas militants did not receive much attention in our surveys, except amongst the respondents in SE6 Ukraine (Figure 1). The multinomial logit model for this blame attribution indicates five significant predictors but the effects are small as seen in Figure 3. Residents in SE6 Ukraine show a 6.5% greater positive blame for the Donbas militants and those who believe that the end of the Soviet Union was a right step (a group concentrated in the SE6 Ukrainian sample) show a positive effect of 3%. In contrast, those who trust TV news (minus 3.1%), those who watch Russian television stations (minus 4.7%) and those who are 'very proud' of their nationality at minus 3.5% also show significant effects. The relative lack of significant effects for this model is not surprising since the public debate over the plight of MH17 had focused on either Russian or Ukrainian guilt and divisive lines did not develop as readily among the populations of our survey sites about the Donbas militants.
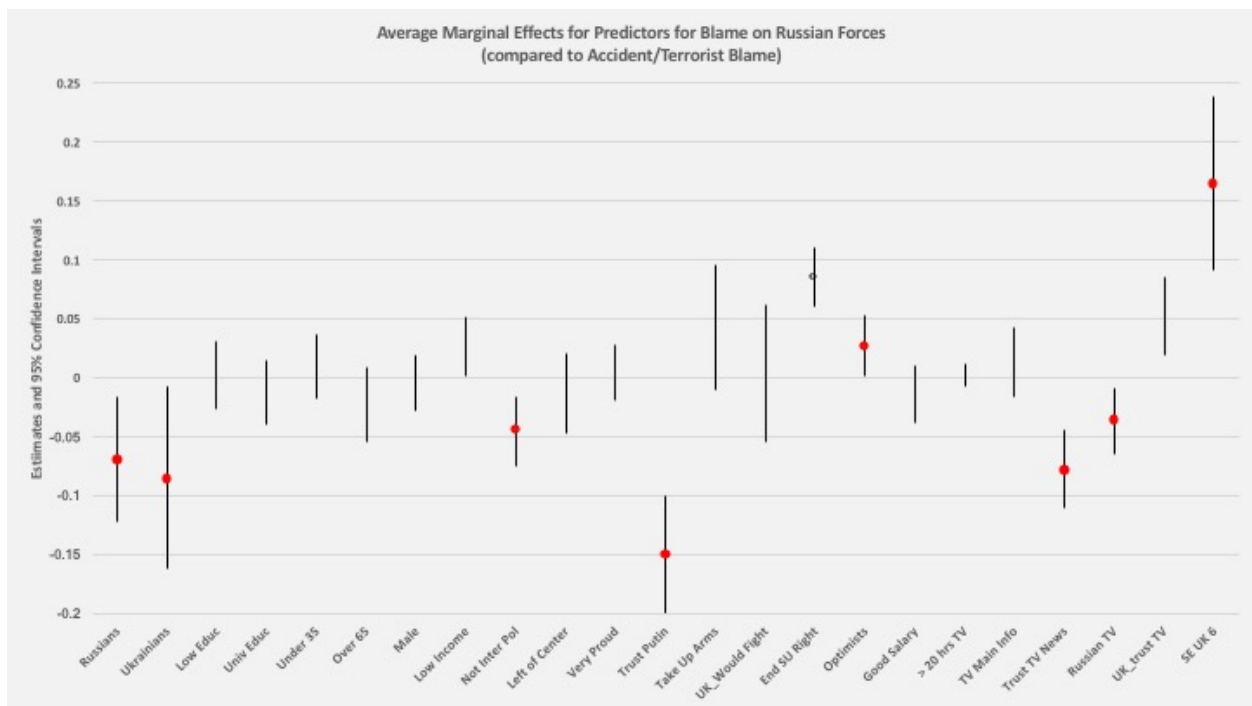

Figure 3: Average marginal effects of individual predictors for blame to Donbas militant forces for the shooting down of MH-17, compared to the respondents who gave "terrorism" or "an accident" as an explanation. Red circles indicate significant differences from the comparator and the vertical lines indicate the error ranges of the estimates

Blame on Russian forces achieved a high rate at 31% among those who self-identify their nationality as Ukrainian in SE6 Ukraine. Elsewhere, the ratio was only sizable at 22% among Georgians in Abkhazia. The results of the first model for Ukrainian forces are mirrored in Figure 4 with the values (minus 15.1%) of the respondents who trust Putin and those who live in SE6 Ukraine (at plus 16.5%) the reverse of the model of Ukrainian blame in Figure 2. Other negative values are seen for those whose trust TV news (minus 7.8%), those who watch Russian TV stations (minus 3.7%) and those who say that they are not interested in politics (minus 4.5%). Ukrainians who trust TV news are 5.2% more likely to blame Russian forces and similar positive values are seen for optimists (those who expect to live better in 2 years) at 2.7% and for those who think that the end of the Soviet Union was a right step at 8.5%. On this blame option, the divides among the survey sample is as clear as it was for the Ukrainian forces, though now the values are reversed.
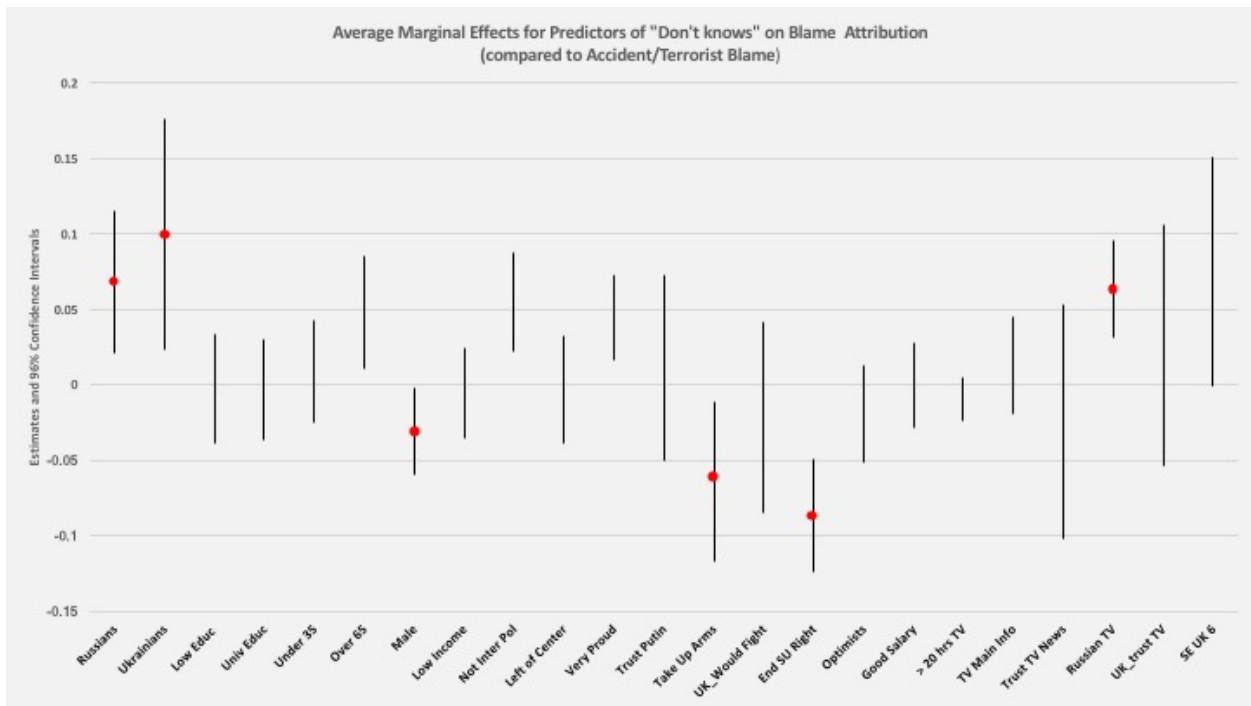

Figure 4: Average marginal effects of individual predictors for blame to Russian forces for the shooting down of MH-17, compared to the respondents who gave "terrorism" or "an accident" as an explanation. Red circles indicate significant differences from the comparator and the vertical lines indicate the error ranges of the estimates

The final model was not expected to yield much clarity on political, nationality, TV watching and ideological divides since a 'don't know' answer could have many different provenances. In the results displayed on Figure 5, those of both Russian and Ukrainian nationality show a greater likelihood of picking a 'don't know' answer than other groups, a function of their probable reluctance to attribute blame in their respective locales of tension (for Russians in SE6 Ukraine and for Ukrainians in Transnistria and Crimea). Those who watch Russian television stations are more likely to give a 'don't know' answer at 6%, perhaps as a response to the accumulating information about the causes of the crash at the time of the survey which was increasingly pointing the finger of blame on Russian-backed forces. This cumulating evidence contradicts their generally pro-Kremlin positions and a 'don't know' answer is one way to resolve this asymmetry. Less likely to give a 'don't know' answer were those who thought the end of the Soviet Union was a right step (minus 8.7%) and those who were willing to fight invaders at minus 6.1%.

Figure 5: Average marginal effects of individual predictors for "don't know" answers for the shooting down of MH-17, compared to the respondents who gave "terrorism" or "an accident" as an explanation. Red circles indicate significant differences from the comparator and the vertical lines indicate the error ranges

Our analysis of the surveys shows that blame attribution was driven more by television habits than any other factor. Of course, habits are ingrained and now dictated increasingly by access to broadcasts from across the border as Ukraine and Russia try to constrain information to certain reliable sources that stick to the government line. Residents in the region (the Black Sea area more broadly) are increasingly living in 'different worlds' despite the shared provenances of their territories in the former Soviet Union and their traditional inter-nationality, language and economic ties.

CONCLUSION

The downing of MH17 was a pivotal event in the Ukraine crisis of 2014, a moment where its violence become worldwide news. A wave of revulsion in the West provided popular impetus for the imposition of new sanctions on Russian individuals and entities by the European Union and the United States in July 2014. MH17 is an event that continues to haunt Russia's foreign policy and the separatists it supports in Ukraine. In January 2017, the Ukrainian government filed a case against the Russian government in the International Court of Justice for the illegal annexation of Crimea and for its financing of acts of terrorism on the territory of Ukraine. Among the acts enumerated is the downing of MH17. Preliminary hearings on the case began in March 2017 and it is not likely to be decided for years.[83] In July 2017, just before the third anniversary of the MH17 downing, the Dutch Foreign Ministry declared that suspects in that downing will be tried in a Dutch court. The evidence gathered by the JIC on the downing of MH17 can be used to prosecute those responsible but it must stand up in court.[84]

MH17 is one among a series of shock events – Euromaidan, the annexation of Crimea, the Odesa tragedy -- that are at the fulcrum of a multimedia 'information war' between Russia and its allies, on one side, and Ukraine, the European Union and the US, on the other.[85] That discursive struggle is characterized by many of the mechanisms we have examined here – affective imagery, the promotion of 'partisan truths,' the politicization of authority and expertise, agnotology and disinformation, othering through conspiracy theory mongering – and it has produced a self-affirming bubble of understanding that is insulated from inconvenient material facts. In this paper, we have shown how ordinary

residents in a set of study sites across the Black Sea region appear to be guided in their understanding of major geopolitical events, like the destruction of MH17, by the televisual info-sphere within which they live. Data analysis also suggests that people tend to follow the narratives of the political leaderships they trust. The high 'don't know' ratios seen in some locations are likely a combination of genuine confusion about the reasons for the plane's destruction (itself a created condition), tactical avoidance of a politicized topic, and decisions by some to not affirm blame narratives contrary to the respondents general (geo)political orientation.

Given their significance in international affairs, scholars need to pay more attention to shock events in conflicts, the storylines disseminated by politically controlled television networks to manage the meaning of these events, and the reception these storylines receive by different audiences. This is particularly important given the manifest fragmentation of traditional media and politics in many Western states, which some commentators have linked to the influence of 'filter bubbles' – information flows shaped by algorithms using past preferences -- and a 'post-truth' politics driving the BREXIT and Trump campaigns of 2016. 'Post-truth' geopolitics is not, unfortunately, a Russian monopoly. It is a pernicious feature of our contemporary geopolitical condition.

NOTES

[1] Dutch Safety Board, *Crash of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17, Hrabove, Ukraine, 17 July 2014*, October 2015, available at: https://www.onderzoeksraad.nl/uploads/phase-docs/1006/debcd724fe7breport-mh17-crash.pdf
[2] See https://www.om.nl/onderwerpen/mh17-vliegramp/presentaties/presentation-joint/
[3] For a video laying out the Dutch Investigating Committee's evidence see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sf6gJ8NDhYA.
[4] Roland Oliphant and Senay Boztas, 'MH17 Investigation: Moscow denounces 'biased' investigation as prosecutors say missile came from Russia,' *Daily Telegraph*, 26 September 2016, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/09/28/mh17-investigation-prosecutors-to-reveal-where-missile-that-down/
[5] For the full text of the announcement in Russian and English see: http://www.interpretermag.com/ukraine-liveblog-day-150-ukrainian-troops-describe-grad-rocket-attack-from-russia/#3391
[6] Much of the 'digital labor' used by units like Bellingcat is unpaid. See Matt Sienkiewicz, 'Open BUK: Digital Labor, Media Investigation and the Downing of MH17,' *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 32 (2015), pp. 208-223. Bellingcat later allied with the Washington

DC based advocacy organization, the Atlantic Council. For a video recounting their MH17 investigative work see: https://www.facebook.com/DFRLab/videos/1747134938634385/

[7] On the competing narratives vying to frame the meaning of the Ukraine crisis see Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015); Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest for Ukraine and the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) and Samuel Charap andTimothy J. Colton, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia* (London: Routledge, 2017). On the media dimension see Mikhail Suslov and Mark Bassin (eds.) *Eurasia 2.0: Russian Geopolitics in the Age of New Media* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016) and Julie Fedor (ed.) *Russian Media and the War in Ukraine* (Stuttgart: Ibidem Press, 2015).

[8] On the importance of narrative to policy making see, *inter alia*, Maarten A. Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) and Ronald Krebs *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). On storylines and the critical study of geopolitics see Gearóid Ó Tuathail, 'Theorizing practical geopolitical reasoning: the case of the United States' response to the war in Bosnia,' *Political Geography*, 21 (2001), pp. 601-628 and John O'Loughlin, Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Vladimir Kolossov, 'Russian geopolitical storylines and public opinion in the wake of 9–11: a critical geopolitical analysis and national survey,' *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 37 (2007), pp. 281-318.

[9] See Kemal Kurspachic, *Prime Time Crime: Balkan Media in War and Peace* (Washington DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 2003); Lara Nettelfield and Sarah Wagner, *Srebrenica in the Aftermath of Genocide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Eric Gordy, *Guilt, Responsibility and Denial* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

[10] On observing the Srebrenica by satellite see Lisa Parks, *Cultures in Orbit: Satellites and the Televisual* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

[11] See McKenzie Wark *Virtual Geography: Living with Global Media Events* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).

[12] See Matthew Sparke, 'Outsides Inside Patriotism: The Oklahoma Bombing and the Displacement of Heartland Geopolitics' in *Rethinking Geopolitics*, eds. Gearóid Ó Tuathail, Simon Dalby (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 198 – 223; Gearóid Ó Tuathail, 'Placing Blame: Making Sense of Beslan,' *Political Geography*, 28 (2009), pp. 4-15; and Reece Jones, *Border Walls* (London: Zed Press, 2012).

[13] For the Russian case see David Satter, *The Less You Know, the Better You Sleep: Russia's Road to Terror and Dictatorship under Yeltsin and Putin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016). For a critique see John Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

[14] See Francois Debrix, *Global Powers of Horror: Security, Politics, and the Body in Pieces* (London: Routledge, 2016) and Elizabeth Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

[15] See James Der Derian, 'The (S)pace of International Relations: Simulation, Surveillance, and Speed,' *International Studies Quarterly*, 34 (1990), pp. 295-310.

[16] On affect in the creation of emotion see Lisa Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017). On the debate over affective transmission and contagion see Margaret Wetherell, *Affect and Emotion: A*

New Social Science Understanding (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2012). On affect and geopolitics see Joseph Masco, *The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

[17] For Ernesto Laclau, 'dislocations' are events that cannot be symbolized by an existent discursive order.' For a discussion see David Howarth, *Discourse* (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 2000), pp. 109-111.

[18] This term is contentious and is associated with 'prospect theory' in psychology and economics. See Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

[19] On the psychological pitfalls of 'common sense', see Duncan J. Watts, *Everything is Obvious: How Common Sense Fails Us* (New York: Crown Business, 2011).

[20] Arkady Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia* (New York, Viking, 2015). On self-censorship as learned *adekvatnost* (correct instincts) within Russian television production see Elisabeth Schimpfossl and Ilya Yablokov, 'Coercion or Conformism? Censorship and Self-Censorship among Russian Media Personalities and Reporters in the 2010s,' *Demokratizatsiya*, 22 (2014), pp. 295-312.

[21] See, for example, Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, 'The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money,' *The Interpreter*, 22 November 2014; http://www.interpretermag.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The_Menace_of_Unreality_Final.pdf.

[22] Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, *Merchants of Doubt* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010) and Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

[23] Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, 'Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures.' *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 17 (2009), pp. 202-227; Laura Jones, 'The Commonplace Geopolitics of Conspiracy,' *Geography Compass*, 6 (2012), pp. 44-59.

[24] Ilya Yablokov, 'Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of Russia Today (RT),' *Politics* 35 (2015), pp. 301–315.

[25] Andrew Barry, *Material Politics: Disputes Along the Pipeline* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2013) and Sarah Wagner, *To Know Where He Lies: DNA Technology and the Search for Srebrenica's Missing* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008).

[26] See: http://www.russiansearchtips.com/2015/01/top-10-russias-largest-media-2014/

[27] On Russian media and the importance of *Vremya*, see Arkady Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia* (New York: Viking, 2015).

[28] The ownership history of *Inter* and its place in the Ukrainian media landscape is complex (ironically it is partly owned by *Perviy Kanal*). For an introduction see Taras Kuzio, *Ukraine: Democratization, Corruption, and the New Russian Imperialism* (Santa Barbara: Praeger Security International, 2015), especially p. 391. On Ukrainian media ownership see Dmytro Korol, Yuriy Vinnychuk and Diana Kostenko, 'Informatsiina zbroia – komu nalezhat' ukraiinski ZMI,' *Insider*, 9 December 2015, http://www.theinsider.ua/infographics/2014/2015_smi/vlasnyky.html

[29] BBC News, 'Ukrainian siege of 'pro-Russian' Inter TV studios ends,' 6 September 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37288630

[30] Elizaveta Gaufman, *Security Threats and Public Perception: Digital Russia and the Ukraine Crisis* (London: Palgrave, 2017). For one of many MH17 conspiracy video produced by Russian media see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arNfVvUnKC8. On the debunking

of Russian television claims by social media see Vitaly Shevchenko, 'Web Users Debunk Russian TV's MH17 Claim,' *BBC Monitoring*, 15 November 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30064374

[31] Dutch Safety Board, *Crash of Malaysian Airlines MH17*, p. 26.

[32] For these initial reports, the second of which quotes DNR representatives saying they do not have weapons that could hit a plane at such height, see: http://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-07-17/37495-boing_777_malayziyskih_avialiniy_poterpel_krushenie_v_donetskoy_oblasti and http://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-07-17/37496-boing_777_malaziyskih_avialiniy_ruhnul_na_territorii_ukrainy_nedaleko_ot_posyolka_snez hnoe

[33] See: https://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-07-17/37497-295_chelovek_pogibli_segodnya_v_aviakatastrofe_v_donetskoy_oblasti

[34] https://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-07-17/37498-postupaet_informatsiya_chto_uzhe_naydeny_oblomki_boinga_i_neskolko_desyatkov_tel_pog ibshih

[35] https://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-07-17/37499-v_aeroportu_amsterdama_soobschili_chto_reys_do_kuala_lumpura_byl_otpravlen_bez_zade rzhek

[36] See, for example: https://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-07-17/37503-redaktor_zhurnala_natsionalnaya_oborona_i_korotchenko_prokommentiroval_aviakatastro fu_boinga_777

[37] https://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-07-17/37525-interfaks_veroyatnoy_tselyu_ukrainskoy_rakety_mog_byt_samolet_prezidenta_rossii

[38] https://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-07-18/37575-na_mesto_krusheniya_boinga_777_pribyli_nablyudateli_obse

[39] http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46243

[40] https://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-07-18/37578-chto_proizoshlo_v_nebe_nad_donetskoy_oblastyu_raznye_versii_aviakatastrofy_boinga_777

[41] https://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-07-18/37585-v_nyu_yorke_prohodit_ekstrennoe_zasedanie_soveta_bezopasnosti_oon

[42] Remarks by Ambassador Vitaly Churkin, United Nations Security Council, S/PV.7219, 18 July 2014.

[43] https://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-07-18/37587-kak_politiki_mogut_ispolzovat_katastrofu_na_ukraine

[44] *Ibid.*

[45] *Ibid.*

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] https://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-07-19/37636-minoborony_rf_kommentiruet_stremlenie_kieva_naznachit_vinovnyh_v_katastrofe

[48] https://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-07-20/37670-komu_vygodno_kiev_i_opolchentsy_obvinyayut_drug_druga_v_katastrofe_boinga_777

[49] The animation segment is 25 seconds long, from 6:48 to 7:13.

[50] https://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-07-18/37587-kak_politiki_mogut_ispolzovat_katastrofu_na_ukraine

[51] http://podrobnosti.ua/news-release-list/2014/7/17/20/0/ (full broadcast 17 July 2014).

[52] http://podrobnosti.ua/985209-terrorist-girkin-fakticheski-vzjal-otvetstvennost-za-sbityj-boing-777-na-sebja.html

[53] http://podrobnosti.ua/news-release-list/2014/7/18/20/0/ (full broadcast 18 July 2014).

[54] http://podrobnosti.ua/985378-stavka-na-lozh-rossija-pytaetsja-opravdatsja-za-sbityj-boing-fejkami-video.html

[55] http://podrobnosti.ua/985381-merkel-prinjala-reshenie-o-rasshirenii-sanktsij-protiv-rossii.html

[56] http://podrobnosti.ua/985384-v-hode-zasedanija-sovbeza-zvuchali-rezkie-zajavlenija-v-storonu-rossii.html

[57] http://podrobnosti.ua/985385-moskvichi-vosprinjali-avariju-boinga-kak-lichnuju-tragediju-video.html

[58] For a video of Kartapolov's presentation see: https://www.rt.com/news/174412-malaysia-plane-russia-ukraine/. The translation that follows uses that provided for this video.

[59] https://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-07-21/37747-minoborony_rf_obnarodovalo_svoi_dannye_otnositelno_aviakatastrofy_malayziyskogo_boinga

[60] https://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-07-22/37828-eksperty_aktivno_kommentiruyut_dannye_ob_ektivnogo_kontrolya_obnarodovannye_nakanune_minoborony_rf

[61] For a video segment immediately after criticizing the United States see Grigori Yemelyanov: https://www.1tv.ru/news/2014-07-22/37829-zamyat_dlya_yasnosti_reaktsiya_kieva_i_vashingtona_na_ob_ektivnye_no_neudobnye_dlya_sebya_dannye

[62] http://podrobnosti.ua/985716-videoobraschenie-putina-k-natsii-snimali-vpopyhah-video.html

[63] http://podrobnosti.ua/985712-germanskie-smi-prizyvajut-ostanovit-putina.html

[64] http://podrobnosti.ua/985710-kemeron-objasnil-putinu-chto-za-nim-sledit-ves-mir.html

[65] See http://podrobnosti.ua/985880-eksperty-obse-vernutsja-v-torez-za-telami-i-oblomkami-samoleta-video.html (22 July) and http://podrobnosti.ua/985881-rossijskij-ekspert-nazval-glupostju-versiju-kremlja-o-gibeli-boinga-777-video.html (23 July).

[66] Lukashevich does not state it in this clip but the maximum ceiling height of a Su-25 is 5.6 km. Because the planes are old, most would struggle to even gain this altitude.

[67] See also: http://euromaidanpress.com/2014/07/22/russian-hero-pilot-accused-the-russian-defense-ministry-of-lying-about-the-boeing-777/#arvlbdata

[68] For example, see 23 July report: http://podrobnosti.ua/986027-vse-tela-zhertv-katastrofy-boinga-777-otpravjat-v-gollandiju-do-pjatnitsy-video.html

[69] http://podrobnosti.ua/986203-hodakovskij-v-intervju-reuters-priznal-chto-Buk-vernuli-v-rossiju.html (24 July 2014).

[70] For an example see 24 July report from the Washington correspondent Dmitry Anopchenko: http://podrobnosti.ua/986186-ssha-nanosit-udar-po-rossijskomu-beznesu.html

[71] The Russian text was: СЛЫШАЛИ ЛИ ВЫ О КРУШЕНИИ 17 ИЮЛЯ МАЛАЗИЙСКОГО САМОЛЕТА В НЕБЕ НАД УКРАИНОЙ, И ЕСЛИ ДА, ПОЧЕМУ, НА ВАШ ВЗГЛЯД, ПОГИБ ЭТОТ САМОЛЕТ? We have used a paraphrase of the interview question for this article's title. We are well aware that MH17 was less a plane "crash" (which suggests accidentally hitting the ground or another object) than a shoot-down (purposeful destruction in flight).

[72] For the results and brief analysis, see http://www.levada.ru/2014/07/30/katastrofa-boinga-pod-donetskom

[73] Quoted in Alec Luhn, 'MH17: Vast Majority of Russians believe Ukraine downed plane, poll finds,' *The Guardian* 30 July2014. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/30/mh17-vast-majority-russians-believe-ukraine-downed-plane-poll

[74] In July and August 2014 Levada asked a more direct blame allocation question (which we chose not to use) in national surveys with an option that included the United States. See Levada Center, 'Who downed the Malaysian Boeing in Eastern Ukraine?' 3 October 2014, http://www.levada.ru/en/2014/10/03/who-downed-the-malaysian-boeing-in-eastern-ukraine/

[75] For discussion of the survey see John O'Loughlin, Gerard Toal and Vladimir Kolosov, 'The Rise and Fall of 'Novorossiya': Examining Support for a Separatist Geopolitical Imaginary in Southeast Ukraine,' *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33 (2017), pp 124-144.

[76] Gerard Toal, John O'Loughlin, 'Frozen Fragments, Simmering Spaces: The Post-Soviet De Facto States,' in Edward Holland and Matthew Derrick, eds, *Questioning Post-Soviet,* (Washington DC: Wilson Center, 2016), pp. 103-125, available at https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/questioning_post-soviet.pdf.

[77] For a summary of gender differences, see Tom W. Smith, 'The Polls: Gender and Attitudes toward Violence,' *Public Opinion Quarterly* 48 (1984), pp. 384-396.

[78] Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) 'The Views and Opinions of South-Eastern Regions Residents of Ukraine, April 2014, ' http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=news&id=258

[79] 'Frozen Fragments, Simmering Spaces'

[80] For a consideration of how political partisans get past awkward facts about their leaders to 'convenient truths' see Drew Westen, *The Political Brain* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007).

[81] Andrew Linke and John O'Loughlin, 'Reconceptualizing, Measuring, and Evaluating Distance and Context in the Study of Conflicts: Using Survey Data from the North Caucasus of Russia.' *International Studies Review* 17 (2015), pp. 107-125.

[82] See, for example, 'MH17: Source of the Separatist Buk. A Bellingcat Investigation,' 8 November 2014, https://www.bellingcat.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Origin-of-the-Separatists-Buk-A-Bellingcat-Investigation1.pdf. The growing body of evidence was consistently contested, when acknowledged, by Russian television.

[83] Roland Oliphant, 'Ukraine sues Russia in International Court of Justice for 'financing terrorism,' *Daily Telegraph*, 6 March 2017, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/03/06/ukraine-sues-russia-international-court-justiceforfinancing/

[84] The JIC have identified approximately one hundred individuals involved in moving the Buk weapon system into Ukraine. The degree to which Ukraine is responsible for not closing airspace over the eastern conflict zone is a matter of debate. For a review of the applicable international law see Mark Gibney, 'The Downing of MH17: Russian Responsibility?' *Human Rights Law Review* 15 (2015), pp. 169-178.

[85] Henry Hale, Oxana Shevel, Olga Onuch, "Belief Formation in the Fog of War: A Case Study of the 2014 Odesa Tragedy." Manuscript under review.