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# Authoritarian media and foreign protests: evidence from a decade of Russian news

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## ABSTRACT

The proliferation of protests around the world poses challenges for authoritarian media outlets. While censoring news about protests abroad may push audiences to alternative news sources, their coverage could motivate citizens to take to the streets at home. To explore whether and how authoritarian media outlets cover foreign protests, we leverage evidence from Russia. Combining evidence from a decade of news coverage with protest-event data, we show that far from censoring news on protests abroad, authoritarian outlets afford them extensive coverage. The coverage of foreign protests, however, declines on days of large Russian protests, when the costs of encouraging mobilization are potentially greater. We also show that authoritarian media selectively use protests abroad, especially those in democracies, to convey the image of citizen activism as threatening and disorderly. Findings, which speak to research on authoritarian propaganda, have implications for scholarship on protest management and authoritarian resilience.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS


Authoritarian politics; media coverage; protest; public opinion

## Introduction

The second decade of the twenty-first century saw just under 100 revolutionary episodes and the greatest number of nonviolent resistance campaigns since 1990 (Chenoweth 2020). The existing literature documents the threat protests at home and abroad pose for authoritarian regimes and studies the ways in which autocrats seek to defeat-proof the streets (e.g. Robertson 2010). Using propaganda and censorship, autocrats aim to shape citizens' beliefs about the desirability and consequences of protest participation. Despite the proliferation of protests around the world, scholarship on authoritarian politics focuses on state-controlled outlets' decision to cover protests that take place at home (e.g. Egorov, Guriev, and Sonin 2009; King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Smyth and Oates 2015) and has less to say about the decision to cover protests in the rest of the world. Insights from studies of how authoritarian media cover revolutionary episodes abroad (e.g. Koesel and Bunce 2013) may not generalize to protests that advance non-political demands or to protests that take place in democracies.

Proliferating protests pose a series of dilemmas for authoritarian media outlets. On the one hand, media outlets in authoritarian regimes, like those in democracies, may elect to cover foreign protests.

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Yet, the costs of doing so are high. Protest coverage may contribute to the diffusion of protest frames and innovations (e.g. Beissinger 2007; Levitsky and Way 2002) and help establish protest as acceptable and legitimate in the public consciousness, undermining the stability of nondemocratic rule. On the other, authoritarian media outlets could censor information on protests abroad. This decision also comes at a cost. In electoral autocracies where citizens can access independent information, either through social media or via independent outlets, censoring news on foreign protests may fail to elicit the regime's desired outcome and could even backfire. Censorship could push audiences to alternative outlets and dampen the credibility of state propaganda.

Understanding whether and how authoritarian media cover foreign protests is important for understanding how contemporary authoritarian regimes engage with developments abroad and the various ways in which they may seek to shape audiences' views of protest and protest participation. Protests remain one of the most consequential actions individuals can undertake to influence democratization. Using news framing to shape mass perceptions of protest as undesirable or threatening, authoritarian outlets could potentially help pre-empt participation in protests at home and dampen demonstrators' ability to generate support. As research shows, authoritarian propaganda may shape citizens' beliefs and behaviors in ways that contribute to the stability of authoritarian rule (e.g. Huang, Boranbay-Akan, and Huang 2019; Rozenas and Stukal 2019). For example, leveraging evidence from Chinese media, Carter and Carter (2021a) show that propaganda-based threats can reduce actual levels of protest.

Drawing on evidence from Russia, this paper explores the relationship between foreign protests and their coverage in authoritarian media outlets. The analysis uses original, Russian-language data from a corpus of 244,928 Channel 1 stories that span the period 2011–2021. Channel 1, a Kremlin-owned outlet and mouthpiece with near universal penetration, is representative of other state-controlled outlets in the country. Combining data on protests that take place around the world and in Russia with Channel 1 news stories, we begin by documenting a robust correlation between the daily occurrence of protests abroad and their coverage on Russian TV. At the same time, days of large domestic protests, associated with growing threats to the regime, dampen foreign protest coverage. One interpretation of this empirical regularity is that when the costs of foreign protest coverage increase, authoritarian outlets shy away from broadcasting news that could, potentially, inflame opposition. Finally, we use structural topic models to investigate the rhetoric Russian federal TV uses in its coverage of foreign protests. Evidence suggests that protest coverage emphasizes the costs and negative consequences of collective action and that hostile coverage is more pronounced when it comes to protests in democracies, as opposed to protests in other authoritarian regimes.

To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the first works to study how authoritarian outlets cover protests that advance a range of demands across democratic and non-democratic regimes and to combine protest-event and media data that span over a decade in order to do so. Leveraging new data, we add to several studies of how Russian state TV covers revolutionary episodes and large protests such as those of the Arab Spring and Euromaidan (e.g. Koesel and Bunce 2013). By investigating the coverage of foreign protests in a non-democracy, this work also contributes to the literature on authoritarian media control and propaganda (e.g. King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Lorentzen 2013; Smyth and Oates 2015). While existing scholarship has focused on authoritarian outlets' decision to censor or cover domestic protests (e.g. Lorentzen 2013; Qin, Strömberg, and Yanhui 2018), relatively less is known about the coverage of foreign protests in these regimes.

While directly testing the effects of media coverage on public opinion falls beyond the scope of this work, our efforts to better understand the content of foreign news coverage provide evidence of the real-world treatments media audiences are exposed to in non-democracies. Our findings are consistent with the possibility that autocrats use foreign protests in order to discredit protest mobilization abroad and at home. Electing to showcase foreign protests in a negative light, authoritarian media may, by association, convey the image of protests as threatening and undesirable. Indeed, the extensive and hostile coverage of foreign protests on Russian state TV may have contributed to Russians' views of protest in general as disorderly. The negative coverage of foreign

protests may also serve to undermine positive evaluations of the countries where protests take place. For example, between January and November 2020, a period during which media coverage of the US was dominated by the hostile coverage of protests against racial inequalities and police brutality, the share of Russians who viewed the US favorably declined from 42% to 35%.

Finally, through our analysis of Russian media, we demonstrate the opportunities associated with natural language processing and topic modeling to explore text data that comes in a language other than English. Despite the wide availability of text data in multiple languages, the majority of the existing work and methodology focuses primarily on English-based corpora (Kaity and Balakrishnan 2020). The paper also introduces a set of Russian-language tailored dictionaries used to identify stories on protest, as well as validates and refines new geo-classification tools (Watanabe 2018) for identifying the country covered in each news segment. We join other recent studies (e.g. Alrababah and Blaydes 2021; Paskhalis, Rosenfeld, and Tertychnaya 2022) in demonstrating the potential value of analyzing materials written in the original language as a tool for understanding authoritarian politics.

### Foreign news in electoral autocracies

Existing research proposes several incentives that encourage authoritarian outlets to cover news and developments that take place abroad. For example, Alrababah and Blaydes (2021) show that authoritarian state media in Syria cover foreign countries as enemies in order to enhance their own political position at home. Their evidence suggests that coverage of Israel as a diversionary threat decreased when the potential for normalizing Syria-Israeli relations grew. Baum and Zhukov (2015) also show that authoritarian outlets' coverage of the 2011 Libyan uprising and of the Arab Spring reflected the interests of the authorities. Authoritarian outlets under-reported action by regime opponents, sidelined government atrocities, and over-reported atrocities caused by rebels. Studies of Chinese outlets' coverage of the Hong Kong and Black Lives Matter protests reach a similar conclusion, showing that foreign protest coverage is largely driven by domestic considerations (Zhang 2022). Studies of how state-controlled media in Saudi Arabia covered protests in Egypt report similar findings. According to evidence, Saudi Arabian outlets under-reported calls for the authorities' resignation and provided favorable coverage of the authorities (Ghobrial and Wilkins 2015).

Authoritarian outlets' decision to cover foreign protest and revolutions may reflect, in part, the fact that revolutionary episodes and large uprisings are costly to ignore. In electoral autocracies where citizens can independently access information about foreign news, either through social media or via independent news outlets, censorship may push audiences to alternative outlets and dampen the credibility of state propaganda. As Gehlbach and Sonin (2014) argue, any government that hopes to control media content faces an important constraint: bias may reduce the informational content of the news and decrease viewership among those who value credible information. Using empirical evidence from China, Hobbs and Roberts (2018) also show that when governments suddenly impose censorship on previously uncensored information, citizens who typically consumed this type of information begin to search for it elsewhere.

At the same time, the costs of engaging with foreign protests remain high. Authoritarian outlets' decision to broadcast news about mass protests abroad could potentially motivate protest participation at home. By covering foreign protests, authoritarian media may inadvertently shape a range of citizen attitudes, such as beliefs about the desirability of mass mobilization and assessments of the authorities. For example, by showcasing mass mobilization around the world, authoritarian outlets may convey the image of protest as a legitimate and even desirable way for citizens to communicate grievances. The power of example may also exert an independent effect on individuals' willingness to participate in protest at home and could shape their beliefs about others' willingness to do the same. The spread of protests in authoritarian regimes across North Africa and the Middle East as well as Eastern Europe and Central Asia illustrates how information about protests in neighboring

countries may motivate further protest action (e.g. Beissinger 2007). Finally, it is possible that by shedding light on the grievances of individuals abroad and on foreign governments' responsiveness to protest, authoritarian media may inform people's expectations of how the authorities should respond to street protest, accommodating demonstrators' demands. As existing research shows, citizens' evaluations of their country and its government are affected by their perceptions of foreign conditions, even in authoritarian contexts (e.g. Huang 2015).

### ***Variation in foreign protests' coverage***

Building on existing research, we propose that authoritarian outlets' decision to cover foreign protests, as well as choices about how to portray these events, may serve various related objectives. Chief among them is the need to lower the authorities' costs of staying in power. Authoritarian outlets could accept the costs of spreading information and awareness of mass mobilization abroad in order to shape domestic audiences' beliefs about the (un)desirability and consequences of protest participation at home. As research in political psychology shows, associative learning or priming – mechanisms based on inferences drawn between two associated objects, words, or cognitive domains (here the parallels between foreign and domestic protest) – can influence how individuals form opinions and respond to their surroundings (e.g. Shanks 1995). Associative cues may be especially powerful in low-information environments (e.g. Berinsky et al. 2020), such as those of electoral autocracies. In these contexts, individuals are rarely provided with opportunities to observe the domestic political opposition in action or to learn about non-systemic parties' platforms. Associative cues may therefore inform expectations about the (un)desirability of domestic protests, their potential consequences, and the characteristics of their organizers. Consistent portrayals of protests abroad as disruptive and violent may, by association and through negative affect, also shape individuals' beliefs about the legitimacy and desirability of the foreign protests described in a news segment and that of protests more broadly (e.g. Aytaç, Schiumerini, and Stokes 2018).

As existing research on reference points reminds us, in order to ameliorate evaluations of current domestic conditions, governments may contrast them to either a time in the past, or to another country that is meaningful for domestic audiences. For example, Belmonte and Rochlitz (2019) and Malinova (2021) have shown that the "turbulent 1990s" reference point was constructed by the Kremlin in order to highlight the "stable 2000s." By juxtaposing the turmoil of the 1990s to the stability of the 2000s, this narrative created a powerful contrast that contributed to the legitimization of Putin's rule. In a similar vein, negative portrayals of foreign protests and of democratic political processes could help depict Russian politics as stable and desirable, contributing to more favorable evaluations of the status quo.

We formulate and empirically test four propositions. First, we anticipate that far from censoring information on foreign protests, authoritarian outlets may elect to cover protests abroad (see also Shahin et al. 2016; Zhang 2022). Across authoritarian regimes, the incentives to cover foreign protest could be greater in places where, as in Russia, independent sources of information are available. Second, we anticipate that authoritarian outlets may present stories on foreign protests in ways that discredit protest as a legitimate form of citizen action. For example, to portray mobilization as undesirable, state-controlled media could elect to present demonstrators as extremists and violent. News coverage may also be used to convey the image of foreign protests as disorderly and chaotic. Verbal and visual cues could show protesters clashing with the police, destroying public property, or threatening public order and security. In a similar vein, the coverage of foreign protests may emphasize inefficient protest policing. Presenting the authorities tasked with policing protests as ineffective may not only serve to undermine perceptions of protests but could also motivate greater support for stricter protest policing at home.

Third, we anticipate changes in the frequency of foreign protest coverage as a function of developments at home. Periods of large domestic protests could impact the visibility of foreign protest events over and above foreign protests' occurrence or frequency (see also Carter and Carter

2021b). Autocrats who wish to avoid inflaming opposition may elect to shy away from covering foreign protests when their own citizens are taking to the streets. Finally, we expect that variation in protest coverage could be driven by the relationship between electoral autocracies and the places where foreign protests take place. In line with research that shows bilateral relations to dictate how foreign countries are covered in the press (Boyle, McLeod, and Armstrong 2012; Kim and Shahin 2020), we may anticipate authoritarian outlets to offer more extensive and more hostile coverage of protests that take place in democracies as opposed to other like-minded authoritarian states.

## Research design

### *Case selection*

Contemporary Russia shares many features in common with other illiberal regimes where the authorities control national news outlets. To this day, Russia's main television channels are either directly owned by the state or by subsidiaries of Gazprom, Russia's largest oil and gas company. Three national television channels are the primary source of information for most Russians: Channel 1, Russia 1, and NTV. Channel 1, traditionally considered Russia's leading television channel, has been state-owned since 1994. More than three out of every four Russians watch its news programming regularly. According to Media Scope,<sup>1</sup> Channel 1 programs are consistently among the most watched programs across TV outlets. One of Channel 1's news programs – "Time" (*Vremya*) – is among the channel's most-watched programs.<sup>2</sup> It is well documented that the presentation and framing of news on Russian state TV corresponds to government incentives (e.g. Kazun 2016; Rozenas and Stukal 2019). At the same time, in the period under consideration in our work, which stretches between 2011 and 2021, online media platforms, social media, and to some extent independent outlets such as TV Rain (Freedom House 2017; Paskhalis, Rosenfeld, and Tertychnaya 2022) represented alternative sources through which citizens could learn about developments in Russia and beyond. Among others, the presence of these alternative news sources may have influenced the Russian authorities' decision to engage with foreign protest.

Studies of Russian politics show that in recent years, foreign news coverage has been used to legitimize the Kremlin's agenda at home. For example, according to Sharafutdinova (2020), after the large anti-regime protests of 2011–2012, state media shifted to emphasizing foreign threats. The content of news reporting also became more politicized during Putin's third term in office (Tolz and Teper 2018). Studies of the Kremlin's coverage of the color revolutions and the Arab Spring uprisings further illustrate that Russia, as well as China, made considerable efforts to control the information available to their citizens and framed these events negatively (Koesel and Bunce 2013). Research also shows that Russian state media and news agencies extensively reported on the 2005 and 2011 uprisings in Kyrgyzstan and Egypt, respectively. In both cases, media framing painted the authorities and the police in a positive light, as agencies tasked with maintaining stability, while blaming protesters for disorder and violence (Varacheva and Gherghina 2018). Underlying several of these studies is the assumption that state outlets' coverage of protests abroad is ultimately geared toward shaping protest sentiment at home (Lankina 2016). This paper joins these studies in revisiting the coverage of foreign protests on authoritarian outlets and extends that agenda to consider the coverage of a much wider range of political and non-political protests that took place in democracies and authoritarian regimes over the course of the last decade.

### *Data*

The analysis relies on text data from state-owned Channel 1. The data, covering the decade from January 2011 and November 2021, come from the Channel 1's online archive.<sup>3</sup> In total the corpus includes 244,928 news stories. In keeping with standard practice, we treat the transcripts obtained as



noisy but unbiased sources of information about the news content of the channel (e.g. Paskhalis, Rosenfeld, and Tertychnaya 2022; Rozenas and Stukal 2019).<sup>4</sup>

To identify stories relevant to protests we used a dictionary approach. The final dictionary used in this work, described in online Appendix 1.2, consists of several stemmed words that describe different types of mass mobilization, such as meetings, protests, riots, single-person pickets, and strikes. We manually tested different versions of the dictionary and proceeded with the version that minimized false positives (stories classified as protest related that were not, in fact, about protests) and false negatives (stories on protests that the dictionary did not capture). We assessed the performance of the final dictionary by reading through a random sample of 550 stories; 95% of all entries were correctly classified by the dictionary as related to protest, which is considered robust performance. In total, there are 11,033 protest-related stories on Channel 1, corresponding to 4.5% of the corpus. Protest-related stories mainly describe unfolding or past protests as well as discuss developments regarding protest legislation in Russia and abroad.

All stories in the corpus were geo-classified using Newsmap (Watanabe 2018), a semi-supervised machine learning model trained on capitalized names of geographic locations, currently integrated into Quanteda. Newsmap labels each news story with the most likely country of coverage. To train the Newsmap classifier, we used a large dictionary composed of toponym stems in Russian (11,526 entries).<sup>5</sup> Again, to assess how well geo-classification performs, we randomly selected and manually coded a sample of 651 stories. Newsmap correctly classified 87% of the stories, with 90% of stories on Russia and 80% of stories on foreign countries classified correctly. This is considered robust performance for a machine model.

In total, 2,407 of all news items on protests (corresponding to 21.82% of all protest stories) were classified by Newsmap as related to Russia. The remaining 8,626 news items (corresponding to 78.18% of the sample) were classified as covering protest events and developments in other countries. Across this period, stories on foreign protests outnumbered stories on domestic events by 3 to 1. The share of foreign protests on Channel 1 rarely dropped below 50% of all stories on protests. However, emphasizing foreign over domestic protests was not typical of all outlets in the country. For comparison, we estimate that throughout 2011–2021, the share of foreign protest stories on independent outlet TV Rain was one-third that of domestic protest events.

Descriptively, we see that throughout 2011–2021, Channel 1 covered protests that raised a range of grievances. Coverage was not restricted to political protests, or to protests that took place in like-minded authoritarian countries. For example, beyond the protests related to the Arab Spring and its aftermath in Egypt and Libya in 2011 and 2012, Channel 1 extensively covered the anti-austerity protests in Greece in 2012 and 2015, the immigration protests in Germany in 2015, and the 2018 Yellow Vest protests in France, among others. The United States and Ukraine, countries of great importance for Russia and places with widespread protest mobilization, also received extensive coverage throughout this period.<sup>6</sup>

The empirical analysis also relies on protest-event data. Information on the daily count of protests comes from the Global Database of Events, Language and Tone (GDEL) project (Leetaru and Schrodtt 2013). GDEL provides the most extensive protest-event catalogue for our time-frame. To bolster confidence, we also filter the GDEL data to only include events with clear sources cited in the dataset.<sup>7</sup> To complement GDEL data for Russia and obtain estimates of protest size, we combine evidence from the LARuPED (2011–2016) (Lankina and Tertychnaya 2020) and newly assembled protest-event data that span the period 2017–2021, also assembled through the opposition website *namarsh.ru*.

In the sections that follow we combine daily protest-event data with news stories published on Channel 1 every day across 2011–2021. This allows us to investigate the relationship between foreign protests, domestic events, and foreign protest coverage. We also leverage text- as-data methods and structural topic models to characterize the content of protest articles published on

Channel 1 during 2011–2021. As the different parts of the analysis rely on distinct methods, we introduce them in turn.

## Empirical analysis and results

### *Correlates of foreign protest coverage*

We begin by asking whether there is a correlation between the daily count of foreign protests and their coverage on Russian TV. We also explore whether domestic, i.e. Russian, protests impact foreign protest coverage. We ask whether times of heightened uncertainty for power-holders, such as days of large-scale domestic protest, predict foreign protest coverage over and above the daily number of protests that take place abroad.

Our outcome variable captures the daily number of foreign protest stories. First, we count the number of news stories on protests taking place in the 10 countries with the most extensive protest coverage on Channel 1 each year between 2011 and 2021. We construct this variable by estimating the number of protest stories per country per year. For each year, we pull the 10 countries that receive the most extensive protest coverage. Across the 10 years we include in our data, protest coverage in these top 10 countries makes up approximately 85% of protest coverage on Channel 1.<sup>8</sup> We further disaggregate all media data into two groups: news stories on protests taking place in democracies and in non-democratic regimes. To specify the regime type, we use a procedural definition of democracy, the presence of free and fair elections, as measured by the Varieties of Democracies project (Coppedge et al. 2016). As is common, we use a cut-off point of 0.5 on to distinguish between democracies and not. Using the democracy item, we split all countries covered by Channel 1 on any given day into two groups – autocracies and democracies – and calculate the total number of protest stories in each group. Here, we do not restrict the analysis to the yearly top 10 democracies and autocracies but consider all democracies and autocracies covered in the context of protest on any single day.

The analysis controls for the daily number of foreign protests in a given subset of countries: the yearly top 10 countries covered by Channel 1, all democracies, or all non-democratic regimes. As already mentioned, information on the count of foreign protests comes from the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT) project. The units of analysis are the individual days between 2011 and 2021, with 3,969 days considered in total.

In the analysis that follows, we control for domestic protest activity to account for a possible link between domestic Russian protests and foreign protest coverage. In Models 1–3, shown in Table 1, we control for the daily number of GDELT events described as “protests” that take place in Russia. However, we are unable to extract information on protest size from the dataset. To examine whether days of large protests, defined here as protests with over 1,000 participants, predict foreign protest coverage, we combine evidence from the LARuPED (2011–2016) (Lankina and Tertytchnaya 2020) and newly assembled protest-event data that span the period 2017–2021.

In Models 4–6 we use a “large protest” binary indicator that identifies days with at least one protest with more than 1,000 participants and also considers the following seven days. Large-scale protests in Russia often last for several days – consider, for example, the 2020–21 protests in support of Khabarovsk’s Governor Sergei Furgal – and are sometimes repeated weekly. Large domestic protests are arguably more difficult to ignore than multiple smaller scale events. It is possible that on days of large Russian protests and in their immediate aftermath, state TV reduces coverage of foreign protests. For the empirical analysis, we use the 1,000 protesters threshold, as it above the average number of protesters who took to the street across Russia between 2011 and 2021. As Robertson (2009) also reminds us, protesters, even in the low thousands, can raise questions about regime vulnerability.

All models also control for Russia’s monthly economic misery index. We control for economic conditions, as these can affect domestic protest potential and foreign protest coverage. The Economic Misery Index consists of the monthly inflation rate added to the unemployment rate and is a measure commonly



**Table 1.** Main results with OLS regressions.

	Dependent variable: Number of Foreign-Protest Stories					
	Top 10 (1)	Democracies (2)	Autocracies (3)	Top 10 (4)	Democracies (5)	Autocracies (6)
Foreign protests (top 10, logged)	0.164*** (0.020)			0.163*** (0.020)		
Foreign protests (democracies, logged)		0.148*** (0.018)			0.145*** (0.019)	
Foreign protests (autocracies, logged)			0.096*** (0.017)			0.094*** (0.017)
Protests in Russia (GDEL, logged)	−0.001 (0.015)	−0.010 (0.014)	−0.016 (0.012)			
Large-scale protests (in Russia)				−0.078* (0.030)	−0.073** (0.028)	0.005 (0.027)
Economic Misery Index	0.068 (0.050)	0.011 (0.049)	0.143*** (0.025)	0.072 (0.050)	0.015 (0.049)	0.143*** (0.026)
Year & month FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	−0.356 (0.415)	−0.056 (0.427)	−0.884*** (0.130)	−0.369 (0.416)	−0.069 (0.425)	−0.886*** (0.130)
Observations	3,969	3,969	3,969	3,969	3,969	3,969
R <sup>2</sup>	0.235	0.139	0.326	0.236	0.141	0.326
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.208	0.110	0.303	0.210	0.111	0.302
Residual std. error (df = 3836)	0.661	0.605	0.543	0.661	0.605	0.543
F statistic (df = 132; 3836)	8.916***	4.701***	14.049***	8.978***	4.754***	14.032***

Note: \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01.

used as an indicator of the economic well-being of average citizens. Furthermore, as Treisman (2011) shows, citizens' perception of economic performance is a good predictor of presidential approval ratings in Russia, which can also affect protest potential. To construct the economic indicator, we use official data from the Russian Federal State Statistics Service.

Table 1 reports the models which rely on Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) specifications. As we show in online Appendix 3.2, results are robust to alternative model specifications that include using lagged items and negative binomial regressions.<sup>9</sup> To account for potentially correlated errors for news stories published on the same day, we cluster standard errors by date. In all six models, the outcome variable (daily number of protests) and all other variables that capture the daily number of foreign and Russian protests are log-transformed. Models 1–6 suggest that the coverage of foreign protests on Channel 1 is responsive to the occurrence of protests in the rest of the world. The number of protests in foreign countries robustly predicts an increase in Channel 1 protest coverage. This result is consistent for all specifications independently of the sample (i.e. top 10 countries, all democracies, or all autocracies). Interestingly, the effect of foreign protests appears to be smaller for protest coverage in autocracies. This implies that Channel 1 editors may be more eager to cover foreign protests if they occur in more democratic countries.

Models 4–6 also imply that domestic protests, in particular protest events that attract over 1,000 participants, may affect Channel 1's broadcasting strategy. While there is no significant association between the daily count of protests in Russia and Channel 1 coverage, large-scale domestic protest events and their aftermath negatively impact foreign protest coverage. The negative effect of large domestic protests on protest coverage holds in Models 4 and 5 that consider coverage across each year's top 10 countries and in democracies. This empirical regularity implies that Channel 1, a Kremlin mouthpiece, may be reluctant to attract the public's attention to any protest activity on days of large domestic protests and in their immediate aftermath.

To further investigate the relationship between domestic protests and foreign protest coverage, we use an alternative specification of the large protest item. In online Appendix 3.2, Table A6, we present specifications that consider in turn: (1) days of large protests; (2) the seven-day interval leading up to them<sup>10</sup>; and (3) the seven-day interval in their aftermath. Again, we expect large domestic protests to continue affecting Channel 1's foreign protest coverage for some additional days.<sup>11</sup> Findings suggest a significant increase in foreign stories for the top 10 countries and autocracies a week before large protest action in Russia. At the same time, foreign protest coverage shrinks on the day of large protests and a week following the protest for the top 10 countries and democracies. The magnitude of the decrease in coverage varies: while it is relatively small before and after a large protest (around 0.05 points), it is larger on the day of the protest (decrease by 0.1 points). It is possible that, in the lead-up to protests, Channel 1 uses protest framing to undermine protest activity, potentially in order to dissuade protest participation. However, as protesters take to the streets, the potential downsides of drawing unwanted attention to protest activity in general start to outweigh the benefits of protest coverage.<sup>12</sup>

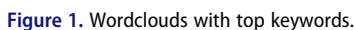
### ***Foreign protest stories: evidence on the content of coverage***

In this section, we use structural topic models (STM) to characterize the topics that emerge when state-run media describe foreign protests. Structural topic models allow us to estimate the relationship between key themes, or topics, as these emerge from the text and document-level covariates, such as a story's year of publication, or the type of the country described. We rely on structural topic models for several reasons. Compared to dictionary-based approaches, structural topic models allow us to determine not only the presence of various topics, but also their proportion in each news story. Second, since we do not supply the model with any information on the topics, or themes that we theoretically anticipate to find, we offer a more rigorous test for topic coherence.

In the analysis that follows we introduce two main controls: a continuous variable that accounts for the year of each article's publication and a binary regime type indicator, i.e. whether democratic or not, for the country covered in each story. This variable is the same as the one used to identify democracies and autocracies in the previous section.<sup>13</sup> Diagnostic analysis of models with the number of topics ranging between 4 and 15 suggests that the optimal number of topics for the corpus of foreign protest articles is five. The five topics that emerge give us an overview of the key topics that dominate foreign protest coverage on Channel 1. Here, we focus our discussion on the most prevalent topic in the corpus: descriptions of protests as violent and unruly.<sup>14</sup>

Most articles in our corpus are characterized by some combination of topics or themes that account for the different elements of the story.<sup>15</sup> To characterize the content of each topic, we look at the most frequent terms and articles that are clustered together and review stories with high topic prevalence, usually over 90%. The most frequent terms offer a general overview of the vocabulary that Channel 1 uses to describe each topic. Stories with high topic prevalence provide good examples that can help us describe the different topics. The topic we label as Violence/Disorder is present in 28% of the corpus in total; 3,236 articles (37% of the corpus) have a higher-than-average prevalence for the disorder topic. This suggests that for more than a third of all foreign protest stories on Channel 1, depictions of violence take up a substantial part of the article. The second most prevalent topic in the corpus describes Economic Protests. This topic describes anti-austerity protests, strikes, and other actions against financial hardship. This topic takes up 23% of the corpus. [Figure 1](#) shows the keywords most strongly associated with the two topics translated into English using the DeepL API.<sup>16</sup> A larger font size indicates keywords that appear more frequently.

At 28% of the corpus-level prevalence, the Violence/Disorder frame is consistent with our expectations that Channel 1 portrays foreign protests as destructive and dangerous. Some of the most frequent terms associated with this topic include "police," "clash," and "disorder." The news articles that have the highest proportions of the Disorder topic shown in [Table 2](#) use loaded terms such as "pogroms," "mass riots," and "arson" in order to conjure images of chaos



**Table 2.** Examples of articles that best represent the Disorder topic. Topic prevalence is shown in parentheses.

Date	Title
21 September 2016	Mass riots break out after the murder of a black man by police in North Carolina (98.8%)
22 September 2016	Protest against police brutality in Charlotte, US devolves into arson and “pogroms” (98.8%)
2 November 2014	Law enforcement forces put on high alert in several French cities (98.7%)
19 February 2011	A wave of anti-government protests has reached Djibouti, Kuwait and Morocco (98.6%)
21 September 2016	Mass “pogroms” and attacks on police officers in the state of North Carolina (98.6%)

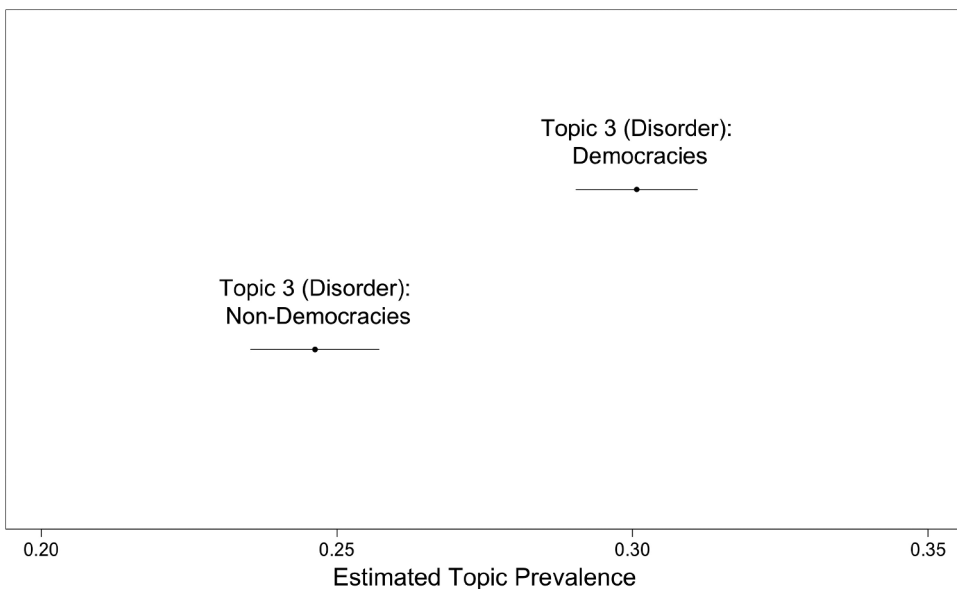
The Economic Protest topic describes anti-austerity protests, strikes, and other actions against financial hardship. The presence of a topic specifically related to economic protests provides further evidence that Channel 1 does not limit its coverage to political protests. Furthermore, it is worth noting that some of the top articles that have a high prevalence of the Economic Protest topic also include mentions of “chaos” and “disruptions” as a result of strikes and mass protests. Spikes in this topic’s prevalence correspond with known waves of anti-austerity protests, such as protests in Greece and Spain in 2010–2015, the 2018 Yellow Vests protests and 2019–2020 anti-pension reform strikes in France, and the 2017 general strike in Catalonia.

To further assess whether the type of regime in which protests take place influences prevalence of the most popular topic in the corpus, describing protests as violent and disorderly, we estimate the effect of regime type on the topic's prevalence. [Figure 2](#) shows the estimated prevalence of the

Violence/Disorder topic for democracies and non-democratic regimes. We find that the Violence/Disorder topic is about 5% more prevalent in Channel 1 stories about protests in democracies than it is in stories about protests in autocracies. Channel 1 is more likely to use the disorder framing when reporting on protest activity in democracies than in other authoritarian regimes.

Do differences in the framing of protests in democracies and non-democracies as violent and disorderly reflect strategic editorial choices, or objective protest characteristics? If protests in democracies are indeed more likely to be violent or to face police interventions than protests taking place in autocracies, Channel 1 could simply be reporting the objective facts. Given various pieces of evidence, this seems unlikely. For example, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) (Raleigh et al. 2010) provides information on whether protesters faced any excessive response or participated in a violent protest. The data suggest that, at least for the period of 2018–2021 for which a global protest sample is available, the share of protest events where protesters were faced with excessive force or participated in a violent protest was about 13% for autocracies and 9% for democracies. GDELT only provides an indication of whether a protest was violent or not, with no distinction between protester violence and police violence, but the data again do not suggest a significant difference between the respective shares of violent protests (about 5.9% in democracies and 5.1% in autocracies). While the prevalence of the Violence/Disorder topic in the corpus is in line with the so-called “protest paradigm” – media reports are often biased against protesters, portraying them in de-legitimizing ways (Chan and Lee 1984; McLeod and Hertog 1999) – differences in the coverage of protests in democracies and autocracies imply a strategic logic on behalf of Channel 1 editors.

The repetition of narratives about protests as violent and disorderly may shape audiences’ views of any protests, abroad or at home, as undesirable. Coupled with descriptions of foreign police forces failing to contain violent protesters, negative portrayals of protest policing abroad may even lead to an increase in support for more restrictive protest management at home. Emphasis on destruction and violence during protests in democracies may serve additional and related purposes as well. For example, it could convey an image of weakness and instability in these countries. This could contribute to disillusionment with the idea that other countries, especially other democracies, grant better standards of living and protections to their citizens. Furthermore, depictions of police



**Figure 2.** Marginal effect of regime type on the prevalence of the violence/Disorder topic.

brutality and of clashes between protesters and authorities may be used to draw audiences' attention to the so-called hypocrisy of Western democracies who often criticize the way Putin's regime handles domestic dissent.

In conclusion, by emphasizing frames of violence and disorder, Channel 1 May be attempting to discredit mass mobilization, especially in democracies. Taken together with our finding showing a decline in foreign protest coverage on days of large domestic protest and in the immediate aftermath, our analysis implies that Channel 1 could be adjusting its broadcasting to accommodate the regime's need to discourage protest participation at home.

## Conclusion

Mass protests, one of the most consequential actions individuals can undertake to influence democratization, represent a key threat to authoritarian incumbents. For state-owned outlets in electoral autocracies, the decision to cover protests or not remains a challenging one. While the coverage of certain types of domestic protests may facilitate bureaucratic monitoring and government responsiveness (e.g. Huang, Boranbay-Akan, and Huang 2019; Lorentzen 2013), it can also enable anti-regime coordination. But while a large literature recognizes dilemmas with the coverage of domestic protests in non-democracies, to date we know less about whether, or how, authoritarian outlets elect to cover protests that happen abroad. To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the first studies to explore whether and how state media cover foreign protests and to interrogate the incentives that drive this coverage in electoral autocracies. Understanding whether and how authoritarian media outlets cover protests is important, given the rise of protests around the world on the one hand and the consequences of domestic protests for authoritarian stability on the other.

We have proposed that the presentation and framing of news about foreign protests help authoritarian leaders, like Russia's Vladimir Putin, lower the costs of staying in power. While autocracies are vulnerable to (news about) foreign protests and revolutions, they are also able to influence the information that their citizens receive about protests and uprisings that take place abroad. The framing of news about foreign protests is another example of authoritarian propaganda.

The use of propaganda, or information manipulation as a strategy of authoritarian control is currently on the rise (e.g. Guriev and Treisman 2020; Hassan, Mattingly, and Nugent 2022). To shape citizens' beliefs about the world and legitimize their rule, twenty-first century autocrats increasingly try to inform and misinform their constituents about domestic and international affairs (e.g. Arnon, Edwards, and Li 2023). Negative portrayals of foreign protests may help authoritarian regimes achieve various objectives. For example, they can help present mass protests as undesirable and disorderly. This could help generate negative perceptions of protest abroad and at home and could dampen people's perceptions of protest efficacy. Negative portrayals of ineffective protest policing in democracies could also help discredit democratic politics in the eyes of ordinary Russians. By association, negative portrayals of foreign protests could help depict Russian politics as more orderly than the politics of countries abroad, contributing to more favorable evaluations of the status quo. Through these complementary channels, the presentation and framing of news about foreign protests could help autocrats defeat-proof their own streets and to do so in an indirect and non-violent manner.<sup>17</sup>

To test expectations, the empirical analysis has relied on original data on the content of coverage from a corpus of Russian-language news stories coming from state-controlled Channel 1. We proceeded in two steps. First, we combined protest-event and media data to assess the relationship between foreign protests and their coverage on Russian federal TV. Next, we used structural topic models to explore key topics in the coverage of foreign protests. Empirical evidence suggests a robust correlation between foreign protests and the volume of foreign protest coverage. Yet, during periods of large domestic protests, Channel 1 becomes less likely to cover protests abroad. Structural topic models suggest that in its coverage of foreign protest events,

Channel 1 emphasizes protests' disorderly and violent nature. This frame is more prevalent for protests taking place in democracies.

There are still several avenues to explore. Understanding which topics dominate foreign protest coverage in a comparative setting beyond Russia and fluctuations in their prevalence over time constitutes a fruitful avenue for future research. Our argument also assumes that, implicitly or by association, the coverage of foreign protests aims to shape domestic audiences' beliefs about domestic protests and mass mobilization and general. Yet, to the best of our knowledge there are no experimental or observational tests of this assumption. Exploring these questions in depth may allow additional insights into the mass opinion effects of propaganda as a tool of persuasion and the mechanisms through which it operates in contemporary electoral autocracies.

## Notes

1. <https://mediascope.net/data/>
2. Media Scope identifies "the coverage" as the number of people who watched the program for at least one minute; this number is a percentage of the total population within the selected target audience. In 2021, Vremya's TV rating was around 8.4%. For comparison, one of the most prominent broadcasts in Russia – "A New Year's Presidential Address," had a rating of 17%.
3. <https://www.1tv.ru>
4. Please see Section 1 of the online Appendix for a full description of the corpus.
5. The dictionary is available on: <https://github.com/Lanabi>.
6. Figure A3 in online Appendix 1.3 shows the top five countries with the highest share of foreign protest reporting on Channel 1 between 2011 and 2021.
7. For more details, please see online Appendix 1.4. Online Appendix 3 also provides descriptive statistics and additional model specifications.
8. A listing of countries that appeared in the list of top 10 countries during individual years of the 10-year period includes, in order of frequency: United States, Ukraine, France, UK, Germany, Spain, Georgia, Turkey, Greece, Syria, Armenia, Egypt, Belarus, Italy, Moldova, Poland, and Israel.
9. See Tables A6–A8 in the online Appendix.
10. Since 2004, protest organizers in Russia are required to submit a request for mass event authorization, thereby alerting the authorities and giving them a chance to adjust the state TV messaging accordingly.
11. As 42% of large-scale protest days are spaced less than a week apart, we test for these relationships separately. We create two variables with the baseline "no protest," which is compared with the protest day and with the days after or before the event.
12. Could the decline in foreign protest coverage reflect a substitution of foreign protest stories with stories on domestic protest events? We find no consistent evidence in support of this expectation. Channel 1 did not extensively cover domestic protests during this period. Indeed, the channel ran no stories on domestic protests during some of the largest periods of Russian protest, e.g. during the large anti-corruption protests organized by Navalny's team across 2017.
13. Controlling for the type of grievances advanced in a protest story (economic, social, political) does not substantively alter the results. See online Appendix 2 for further details.
14. For a full description of all five topics produced by the model and the diagnostic results, including the trade-off between semantic coherence and exclusivity, see online Appendix 2.
15. Only 1,781 articles (20% of the corpus) have a dominant topic with over 90% prevalence.
16. <https://www.deepl.com/docs-api>
17. As a strategy that helps autocrats lower the costs of staying in power, the manipulation of news about foreign protest is complementary to other strategies that autocrats use to manage dissent and generate negative perceptions of protest actions, protest organizers, and participants. Among others, these strategies involve the use of propaganda to discredit protest that take place at home and the use of violent or non-violent repression either in anticipation of, or in response to domestic protests (e.g. Tertytchnaya 2023).

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