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# RUSSIA'S ACCESSION TO THE WTO

## THE DEBATE IN THE RUSSIAN MASS MEDIA

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**ABSTRACT** – *The paper focuses on the debates about Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) that unfolded in Russia's print media from December 2010 to December 2013. The authors highlight the initial arguments of supporters and opponents of this accession, the ways in which those arguments are presented in the media, and the differences in the standpoints of the business, government and expert communities. The authors further analyze changes in the content of this discussion and its discursive space following Russia's accession to the WTO. Our research on print media shows that positive assessments of Russia's accession to the WTO prevailed before it entered into force. However, after the accession negative assessments started to dominate. This may be explained by the fact that before the accession it was mainly politicians and officials who expressed support for the act, while after the accession the negative views of the business community became more prevalent. Politicians and officials supported the accession by relying on abstract values of "progress" and "open markets", while businessmen's (mainly agribusiness) views took into account the non-competitiveness of their industries. Media campaigns helped some industries to create images of "victims" (resulting from enforcement of the treaty) in order to legitimize the industry lobby and the need for government subsidies to compensate for the damage caused by the WTO.*

**KEY WORDS** – *risks and potential benefits of Russia's WTO accession, public discussion, agenda-setting in media*

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Basic Research Program at the National Research  
University Higher School of Economics (HSE)*

## INTRODUCTION

Researchers into mass communication recognize that debates in the media on economic issues are poorly understood (see for example Carroll, 2012). Usually, the attention of researchers has focused on the media reflection of political events or social problems. The most popular approaches to the study of mass communication are constructivism and agenda-setting theory. The constructionist perspective suggests that interest groups with access to the media construct the perception of dysfunction as a problem, mobilize forces to solve it and legitimize their participation in this process (Blumer, 1971; Spector & Kitsuse, 1987). This approach was a reaction to the crisis in the objectivist understanding of social problems (for example Merton, 1968). The agenda-setting theory maintains that the media do not facilitate the understanding of the issues as much as they simply distribute the audience's attention across different events. The media make some of the events "invisible" to the wider audience, while they highlight other events through their dominance of the information space, making these events "important" in the eyes of the population (McCombs & Shaw 1972; Erbring, Goldenberg & Miller, 1980; Boydston, 2013). In other words, "the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (Cohen, 1963, p. 13).

Discussions of economic issues have a number of characteristics that are less typical in discussions on other topics. In particular, journalists need to simplify the information and make it clear to a wider audience, as well as to select attractive, humorous titles for serious news. In addition, economic debates involve a

wide range of different interest groups that try to legitimize their actions and gain public support for the implementation of desirable scenarios of economic development. Thus economic discussions in the media are a promising field for investigation. However, they long remained outside researchers' focus.

One serious limitation for this study is the relatively low level of media freedom in Russia. For example, the Press Freedom Index characterizes the situation in Russia as unfavorable. In the period covered by the study, Russia was ranked 140th of 179 countries.<sup>1</sup> Many researchers have also written about the pressure felt by the media in Russia (for example Vartanova, 2000; Koltsova, 2006). However, there are a few things that make our research possible and accurate. First of all, the greatest pressure on the Russian media is in the coverage of political issues. So stricter limitations on freedom of speech are related to political topics (for example, the Crimea annexation and Chechen war). The authorities "compensate" for this censorship by "playing democracy" during discussions of economic issues. Russia's accession to the WTO may be considered as an example. To some extent this move is related to politics. However, for most parties involved (national producers, consumers, importers, etc.) it was related more to their economic interests than their political views.

In addition, the largest quantity of propagandizing material is put out on federal television channels, rather than in the print media. This may be explained by the fact that television has a broader coverage, while the print media target a more educated population. Moreover, the print media's points of view are more diverse, due to large number of various newspapers and magazines, including opposition publications. In this way, we partly solve the problem, by focusing on an analysis of the press. In addition, the sample of newspapers and magazines for this research includes opposition publications (for example *Novaja Gazeta*).

This paper analyzes the discussion of Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) that unfolded in the Russian print-media from 2010 to 2013. This topic was selected as an object of study because Russia's accession to the WTO affected the interests of a variety of groups, for example businessmen, politicians, officials, consumers. All of these tried to influence the agenda and perception of risks and opportunities connected with this decision, participating in the media discussion. So, for the Russian authorities WTO membership

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1. Press Freedom Index. URL: <http://rsf.org/index2014/en-index2014.php>

was an opportunity to show a willingness to cooperate with Western countries, develop the Russian economy and implement a policy of “open economy”. For opposition politicians WTO accession became a way to extend their support, showing concern for the interests of domestic producers, threatened by WTO membership. Representatives of some business sectors sought to prevent accession to the organization (for example, they created the advocacy group called ANTI-WTO and tried to obtain a referendum on this issue), using the rhetoric of emerging threats as a legitimate framework for the implementation of industry lobbying. The media discussion was extremely active and intensive. Evidence for this is the fact that, according to opinion polls, Russia's accession to the WTO was among the most important events (Levada.ru, 2012).<sup>2</sup>

In this case, the media reflected reality as much as they formed it. In particular, the public discussion attracted the attention of citizens to Russia's accession to the WTO (Kazun, 2015). Articles in the press allowed certain interest groups to transmit their opinions of important public events to a wider audience. Our analysis spans a period of three years—one and a half years before and after Russia's official accession to the WTO in 2012. In this paper, we first contrast the arguments in the Russian media of the supporters and opponents of the accession decision; next, we reveal the particular standpoints of the business, government and expert communities; and finally, we compare the state of the discussion of the WTO before and after Russia's accession. Also, we draw conclusions about the factors that influenced the discussion on Russia's accession to the WTO and the purposes of participants in the debate.

Media discussion of Russia's accession to the WTO is an important topic for study for several reasons. First of all, Russia's accession to the WTO is a relevant event for the country and attracted considerable attention. In addition, discussion on this issue was led by representatives of various interest groups and it may be useful to analyze their purposes. Another reason for attention to the topic is the idea that, normally, when people are poorly informed about a question (as in the case with the WTO) there is a high correlation between public opinion and debate in the media. Thus, the discussions of economic issues such as sanctions may have very important role. However, this topic is insufficiently researched. Researchers of the media often focus on the debate on social issues (such as drug addiction, social exclusion, etc.) and have hardly ever studied economic discus-

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2. At the time of Russia's accession to the WTO (August 2012), only two events attracted more public attention: the Olympic Games in London and the trial of Pussy Riot.

sions. This article is not about the process of Russia's accession to the WTO. And it is not about influence of this decision on Russian media. This article is about how the media reflect the interests of the various groups and their struggle for the support of wide audience to legitimize their action.

## **1. WTO ACCESSION IN A TROUBLED CONTEXT**

WTO accession was connected for Russia with the need for trade liberalization, and tariff and subsidy reductions (for example Shepotylo & Tarr, 2013; Barsukova, 2013). All these measures could have both positive and negative impacts on the Russian economy. And this effect varied between sectors. According to the forecasts, some of them would potentially benefit from the opening of markets, while others would potentially lose—the most alarming predictions were made for the agricultural sector (Wegren, 2012). These controversial predictions largely contributed to the intensification of the debate on this issue in the media.

### **1.1. A long and complex debate**

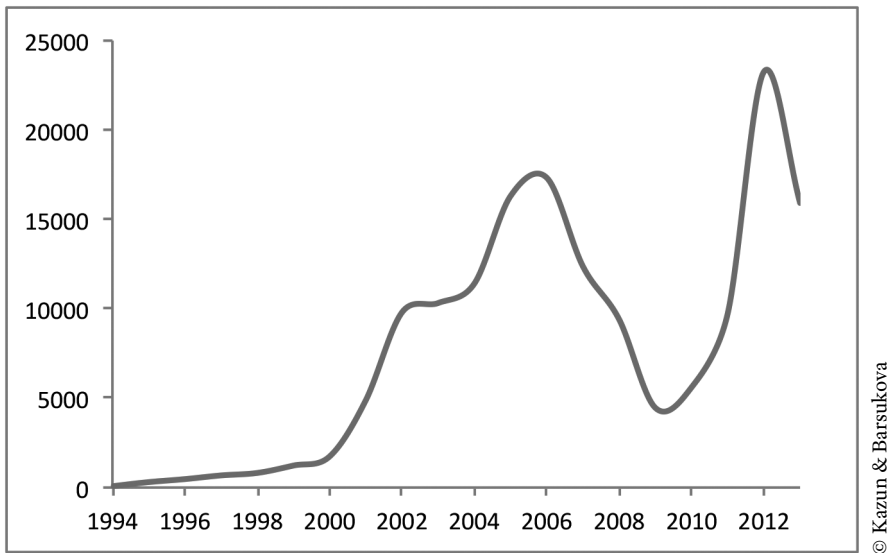
We use the Russian database Integrum to demonstrate the development of Russian print media interest in the WTO topic. This database includes only print media material (not TV, Radio or Internet content, that does not have a printed version).

Integrum contains material from the print media: approximately 500 Russian magazines, more than 250 central and 1000 regional newspapers.

The Russian mass print media showed an interest in the WTO from the beginning of Russia's post-Soviet period (see Figure 1). This interest peaked in 2006 during the Asia Pacific Forum, when Russia made its first agreements with the USA about accession to the WTO. The success of these first bilateral negotiations with the USA generated hopes for Russia's approaching accession to the trade organization. However, it soon became clear that these hopes would not be realized, leading to a sharp decline in interest. A new wave of intense debates about Russia's membership of the WTO was generated at the end of 2010 due to the Russia-EU summit, during which a memorandum was signed about Russia's eventual accession<sup>3</sup>. The accession ultimately took place on August 22, 2012; after that date, interest in the WTO naturally decreased.

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3. Russia's WTO website is located at <http://www.wto.ru>.

**Figure 1. Number of articles that mention WTO in Russian mass media**

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Source: calculated from *Integrum* database.

The discussion of Russia's accession to the WTO proceeded against the backdrop of various economic and political events in the country. Therefore, it was closely linked with the names of top officials. Thus, a significant decline in the intensity of the debate in 2008 was partly connected with the economic crisis and the statement of President Putin, "We wholeheartedly tried to join the WTO, but, fortunately, you did not let us go there!" After Dmitry Medvedev became president in 2008, negotiations with WTO were resumed. The agreement of WTO members to Russia's accession to the organization was received at the end of Dmitry Medvedev's presidential term in 2012.

The period just before accession to the trade organization (end of 2011 and first half of 2012) was marked by widespread political protests in Russia (Bikbov, 2012). This partly influenced the discussion about WTO in the media and the actions of some interest groups. For example, Russia's WTO accession began to compete for media attention with a variety of political issues (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). Thus, the success of the negotiations on accession to the WTO became a convenient theme for shifting public attention from topics that were undesirable to the authorities, but nevertheless problematized in the media. Researchers repeatedly observed the impact of the authorities' representatives on the public



discussions on various topics, including the daily news agenda (Yasaveev, 2006b). However, citizens' attention could not always be redirected. Thus, the Pussy Riot<sup>4</sup> court case coincided with the formal adoption of Russia by WTO members and it led to a decrease in the intensity of the debate on the WTO.

In this difficult political situation, the authorities needed to demonstrate to the citizens their willingness to change and liberalize the economy. Opposition politicians participated in this discussion to gain the support of people who disagreed with the government's decisions. All this led to the politicization of the debate on WTO accession. As will be shown below, the composition of the participants in the debate and their activity in the discussion had a strong influence on its nature.

## 1.2. Temptation to oversimplify debate

In this study, we follow the approach that asserts that social problems are constructed. According to this perspective, there are various ways of drawing attention to problems and highlighting existing dysfunctions: opinion polls, filing lawsuits in court, collecting petition signatures and so on (Blumer, 1971; Spector & Kitsuse, 1987). The background of this theory is the paper by Fuller and Myers (1941), who noted that the existence of some fact in reality does not necessarily make it a problem. Thus, discrimination against the black population was observed in the southern and northern states in the US, but not everywhere (and not always) was this situation defined as problematic. Guided by this logic, the proponents of this approach believe that when we study poverty we have to seek to understand what makes it a social problem and why people define it in such way (Best, 2003).

Consequently, there is no such thing as "natural importance", which automatically excites the mass media with respect to certain events and draws them into the broadcasting focus (Blumer, 1971). The interpretation of an issue largely depends on the social stance of an interpreter; i.e., his or her membership in a certain occupational community (Berger & Luckmann 1966), which makes it almost impossible for the mass media to report anything with complete objectivity. For us, these ideas imply, first of all, the importance of debate in the media in governing public opinion, because mass communication is able to draw the

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4. This was a group of young women who sang a song with antichurch and anti-Putin content in a Moscow cathedral. They were arrested and convicted.

attention of the greatest number of people to the issue. This is therefore important research. Second, claim-makers who are interested in attracting attention to the various aspects of the problem are of great importance to the discussion in the media.

The way in which various issues are problematized, sensitized and interpreted in the mass media is greatly influenced by various authorities (Tidmarch, Hyman & Sorkin 1984; Walker, 1977) and large corporations (Hill & Watson, 2000). Analyzing the situation in Russia, Koltsova highlights a wider range of agents that can influence the media, in addition to the state and business, e.g. the personal beliefs of editors and journalists, as well as direct pressure from law enforcement agencies (Koltsova, 2001). In addition, finance also influences the agenda of the media. “*Dzhinsa* (derived from the English word “jeans”) is a term used in Russian journalistic jargon to refer to paid-for material presented in the media as ordinary news” (Daucé, 2016). Thus, the impact on the media may operate at various levels, both through regulation and the creation of conditions for the discussion, and by the use of direct pressure. However, the opposite is also possible: the mass media’s close attention to particular problems enables politicians and corporations to solve them. For instance, in the mid-1980s, the active mass-media discussion of increasing crime rates in the USA pushed the American government to increase its efforts in solving the problem (Wolfe, Jones & Baumgartner, 2013). Similar examples are found in Russia. For instance, the broadening of policemen’s authority in Kazan caused multiple inspections of police stations across the country (Koltsova & Yasaveev, 2013). Thus, the relationship between interest groups and the media is two-sided: the media influence the government and businesses, and government and business try to influence the media.

The authorities can influence agenda setting in the form of either public appearances or management solutions. It has already been shown that politicians’ attention to various issues has a very short-term effect (Cohen, 1995). A more enduring effect can only be achieved through more direct measures, such as interfering with legislation and/or the business environment (Olds, 2013). That is, certain economic measures or merely the intention to impose them affects agenda setting to a much more significant extent.

However, an issue’s problematization in the media is not always in accordance with the interests of the authorities. Of course, the simplest way to divert

attention from the problem is to eliminate the theme from the news agenda—for example, a ban on media discussion of the issue (Edelman, 1988). However, implementation of this strategy requires a lot of resources (power, administrative resources)<sup>5</sup>. In addition, in today's society opportunities to control mass communications are limited, because of the emergence of new communication channels and the increasing extent of information on the internet. In this context, more complex mechanisms for reducing public attention to the issues have partly replaced bans and taboos. One of the possible strategies for confronting problematization is something like a rethinking of priorities. It is possible to focus on issues more convenient for the government and not pay attention to other negative facts. As result federal TV channels paid particular attention to the problems of terrorism, crime and drug abuse, and ignored the problems of alcoholism and corruption (Yasaveev, 2006a). A possible explanation of such an effect is government media policy.

Similarly, in the case of the debate on Russia's accession to the WTO, we may assume that attempts by interest groups to attract attention to certain aspects of this decision and ignore others contributed to the formation of the desired image of this problem. Emphasis on the benefits of WTO accession and neglect of the potential risks may be important for deproblematizing the situation. However, when the discussion involves several interest groups, silencing the negative aspects of the problem may not have a significant impact on the debate, as the groups pursue different interests. In this case, a wide range of counter-rhetoric strategies may be used (Ibarra & Kitsuse, 2003). Empirical research into the Russian print media and TV channels, analyzing the deproblematization strategies, has focused on a variety of issues, from the excess of glamour in the public space (Nim, 2010) to Russia's accession to the WTO (Kazun, 2015). In general, we can say that all the strategies proposed by Ibarra and Kitsuse, are used in Russian public debate (Yasaveev, 2006b).

However, it is a false assumption to think that the mass media only passively broadcasts the agendas of the authorities and social movements. Various mass

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5. One of the most prominent examples of the government's influence on the media is the case of NTV channel. In 2001, the management of the channel was changed by action by the authorities (raids on its HQ and persecution of the channel Head) and financial pressure. The potential reason for the pressure on the channel was its critical assessment of the authorities' work and particular political events. Another prominent example is the case of Lenta.ru, a popular news website. The management of the website has changed under pressure from RosKomNadzor (the federal agency overseeing telecommunications, information technologies and mass media). Key managers left the company and the tone of the website has significantly changed.

media continuously struggle for market share, which forces them to react only to those issues that particularly excite their real and potential audiences (Graber, 1980; Leighley, 2004; Picard, 2005; Berelson, 1960). The choices that the mass media make among the numerous competing narratives and interpretations of the same issue are exactly how they contribute to shaping the public agenda (Berelson, 1960; Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988).

This orientation towards public appeal, however, leads to negative selection: in making an issue comprehensible to a wider audience, the mass media often fall into the trap of over-simplifying content and exploiting people's most primitive reactions. This is the case, for instance, with modern Russian television (Zvereva, 2009). The oversimplification triggers feedback from the audience, which not only passively absorbs information but also attempts to critically assess it. Thus, realistically speaking, setting an agenda involves several parties simultaneously, i.e., experts, authorities, the media themselves and individuals (Dearing & Rogers, 1987).

The tendency to oversimplify and sensationalize issues at the expense of providing serious analysis was particularly noticeable in the discussions related to the WTO. For instance, some observers note that the popular (mass) media paid too much attention to protests related to the WTO summits, whereas the content and results of discussions that occurred at those summits were largely neglected (Swinnen & Francken, 2006). Simultaneously, in publicizing these protests, the mass media also appeared to be mostly supportive of the WTO and government's position (McFarlane & Hay 2003; Hendershot, 2004). In commenting on anti-globalist protests against WTO accession in Seattle in 1999, the mass media made sharp remarks about the protesters' lack of education, low economic literacy and unkempt appearance (McFarlane & Hay, 2003). Thus, by expressing the interests of political elites, the mass media tried to devalue both the protests and the arguments of the protesters.

Comparative analysis of the public debate on the WTO in other countries has shown how deeply this problem is situated within the context of national policies. For instance, public discussions about protection of intellectual property within the WTO agreement have revealed striking differences between China and the USA (Creemers, 2012). However, significant differences in viewpoints towards the WTO can also be observed within countries, rather than just between them. Media in three American states (North Carolina, Illinois and Cal-

ifornia) have expressed significantly different opinions about China's accession to the WTO, depending on how that event would most likely impact their state's economy (Kong, 1997).

In our work, we pay attention to the way in which the opponents of the WTO problematize Russia's accession to this organization, and supporters deproblematize it. In addition, we analyze the positions of the various interest groups and their role in the debate.

### 1.3. Russian print media on the WTO

Our analysis of the debate about Russia's accession to the WTO in the Russian mass media spans *three years: from December 2010 to December 2013*. This timeline was chosen for specific reasons. First of all, the debate about WTO was most intense in this period. Furthermore, our task in this paper is to compare the debates that took place before and after Russia's accession to the WTO, which is why we study the content of those debates over a period encompassing one and a half years before and after the accession.

Our analysis focuses on the debates that unfolded in the Russian printed mass media, i.e., those publications that have high circulation and target a wider audience. In particular, we have avoided the use of the following media: 1) academic journals, 2) foreign mass media, 3) radio and television discussions, and 4) on-line publications for which there are no printed versions. Moreover, we analyze the print media of various ideological positions because our intent is to analyze as many different opinions as possible about Russia's accession to the WTO.

Russia has more than 90,000 registered media outlets, including central, regional and sectoral media outlets<sup>6</sup>. Russians' trust in Russian printed mass media is typically higher than their trust in radio and foreign media, but somewhat lower than their trust in on-line resources and television<sup>7</sup>. We selected the most influential newspapers, journals and magazines using the Title Popularity Ranking (TPR) of Russian print media<sup>8</sup>. This ranking is calculated from the fol-

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6. <http://www.fapmc.ru/rospechat/docs/newsmi.html?maincustom0=1&>

7. This is the distribution of answers to the question "Which sources of mass media do you think most accurately depict our country's current situation?": 13% selected federal newspapers, 40% central television, and 45% the Internet (June 2013; LEVAŠOV, 2013, p. 257).

8. TPR for Russian media is calculated on a quarterly basis by using available open data. Access

lowing three parameters: circulation, advertising prices and citation ratios (i.e., citation of one media outlet in other print media outlets). Thus, TPR evaluates the popularity of a media outlet among the general population, advertisers and journalists.

In TPR, the print media are classified into certain information categories. We selected three leaders in each of the following three information categories: popular newspapers, popular business publications and popular publications focusing on politics and public affairs. Thus, our sample included 9 publications, which represent different political views and sufficiently reflect the diversity of opinions on public issues.

As expected, the WTO issue was quite actively discussed in the selected publications: it was mentioned in 1,636 articles during the 18 months before and 1,179 articles during the 18 months after the accession. It must be admitted, however, that the majority of these publications printed no opinions or comments on Russia's accession to the WTO and only mentioned the accession as a symbol of economic integration and globalization. Such articles were excluded from further analysis. The final sample subjected to our analysis was composed of 397 articles (see Table 1).

The table shows that *the share of problem-oriented articles containing discussions of Russia's accession to the WTO* grew after the accession had already taken

**Table 1. Articles in Russian print media related to WTO accession (December 2010-December 2013)**

Leaders among print media according to TPR	Number of articles before Russia's accession (December 2010-August 2012)		Number of articles after Russia's accession (September 2012-December 2013)	
	Total	Containing opinions and comments	Total	Containing opinions and comments
Popular newspapers ( <i>Argumenty i Fakty, Moskovskij komsomolec, Komsomol'skaja pravda</i> )	336	56	280	68
Popular business publications ( <i>Ekspert, Kommersant', Vedomosti</i> )	748	56	497	94
Popular publications focused on politics and public affairs ( <i>Rossijskaja gazeta, Izvestija, Novaja gazeta</i> )	552	63	402	60
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,636</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>1,179</b>	<b>222</b>

can be found at the following website: <http://www.exlibris.ru/rejting-izdanij>.

**Table 2. Operationalization of article components**

Component	Indicator	Indicator value
Communicator	Sphere of origin	Economy (industry, agriculture)
		Politics, government Academic expertise Journalism
Message	Attitude towards accession	Negative Neutral Positive
	Emotionality of response	Emotional Unemotional
	Communicated issue	Usefulness of Russia's accession to the WTO Terms of Russia's accession to the WTO Adapting to WTO conditions
	Platform of interests	Industry and businessmen Consumers Country as whole (geopolitics)
	Level of argumentation	Abstract arguments (raising country's prestige, threat to country's economic sovereignty, inevitability of globalization, etc.) Elaborated arguments (relying on strong evidence, cases and notable experts)
	Character of argumentation	Appealing to influential people Appealing to surveys of public opinion Appealing to statistical data Appealing to historic cases Appealing to experience of other countries Appealing to economic models and research No argumentation
Medium of communication	Information category of publication	Popular newspapers Popular business publications Popular publications focused on politics and public affairs
	Ideological stance of publication	Liberal Relatively neutral Pro-government

place. Moreover, this discussion became most prominent in business publications; i.e., the discussion became more focused and expert-based.

To analyze the content of the articles chosen, we used Lasswell's communication model (Lasswell, 1927). This idea, despite its respectable age, is still valid. Lasswell's book is one of the key works in media studies (Shoemaker & Reese, 2011). The model's limited number of components in the mass communication

process and its clarity made it most convenient for organizing the indicators used in the research. According to this model, the following aspects are of particular interest: the communicator, the message, the medium and circumstances of communication, the audience and the impact of the message. To put it more simply, the scheme seeks answers to the following questions: Who initiates the argument? What is communicated? How it is communicated? To whom it is addressed? When it is communicated? The operationalization of this approach is presented in Table 2.

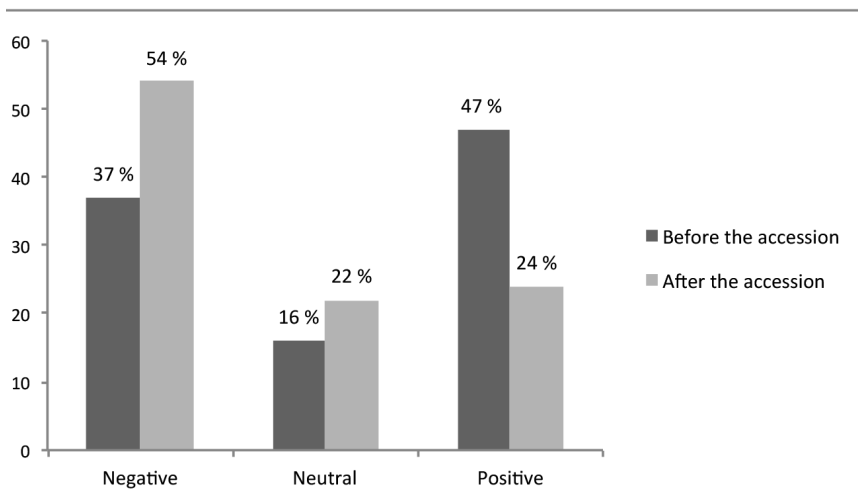
## 2. VARIATION IN OPINIONS ABOUT RUSSIA'S ACCESSION TO THE WTO

Following the initial debate on the usefulness of Russia's accession to the WTO, the discussion in the print media changed substantially to address the risks and real opportunities in this new situation.

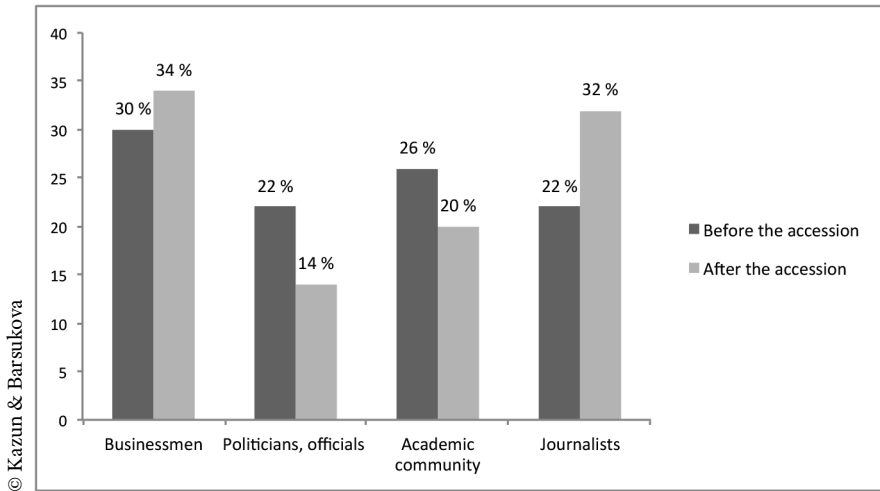
### 2.1. From emotions to allegations

The first noticeable development is *diminishing optimism about the accession*. Before the accession, the print media were mostly flooded with supporters' opinions: positive views were present in 47% of the articles, whereas negative views were present in only 37%. However, following the accession criticism became dominant, with support dropping to 24% and opposition peaking at 54% (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Attitudes towards Russia's accession to WTO





**Figure 3. Different communities' participation in discussion about WTO**

Second, the background of the debaters changed. Academic experts and government officials seem to have abandoned the debate, leaving it to journalists and the business community (see Figure 3). Politicians and officials lost interest in the WTO discussion after the issue was ultimately resolved.

Third, the debate shifted *from discussing the accession to the WTO itself to discussing the particular terms that Russia agreed to when it became a member*. Before August 2012, a majority of articles (68%) either criticized or praised Russia's intention to join the WTO. They either propagated a commitment to support integration with the world economic community or, conversely, demanded protectionist measures to safeguard the national economy. After the accession, the debate became more focused: 56% of the articles moved towards discussing tariffs on particular goods, authorized subsidy rates, limits for state support, etc. This "late response" may be because the last phase of negotiations was hurried (which was quite unexpected given the relatively long history of Russia's accession), and business was actually informed about many of the decisions only after the deal had been settled<sup>9</sup>.

9. "It was only after all of the formal procedures of Russia's accession to the WTO were completed that Russian meat producers learned about them" ("Kolbasnaja kapituljacija" [Sausage capitulation], *Èkspert*, September 10, 2012); "No one ever told us that the 40% tariff for pork imports [...] would go down to 5%. I have no idea why they remained silent. Was it an accident or on purpose?" ("Svinovodov pojimali na 'živka'" [Pig producers were caught for pork in live weight], *Èkspert*, October 1, 2012).

**Table 3. Character of argumentation in debates about Russia's accession to WTO (before and after accession)**

Character of argumentation	Share of articles (percent)	
	Before accession	After accession
Appeal to statistical data	30	38
Appeal to foreign experience	7	3
Appeal to historic cases	3	1
Appeal to research	1	0
No serious argumentation	59	58

Fourth, *the emotional weight of the discussion decreased*. When WTO membership became a *fait accompli* in Russia, there was no longer a reason to fight against it, and the debate more or less calmed down: 84% of the articles were less expressive (i.e., calling the event “catastrophic”, “devastating”, “dramatic”, etc.), focusing instead on facts and analysis.

It was also characteristic of the WTO discussion that *most opinions were expressed relatively boldly and were unsupported by sufficient evidence and arguments*. Approximately 60% of the articles chosen contained nothing but empty speculations about the WTO's possible usefulness or harm, i.e., they were *mere allegations* (see Table 3). If any argumentation was present, it relied mostly on statistical data. However, it looked as though the use and interpretation of statistics were manipulated to back the view of either supporters or opponents of accession.

Relying on other countries' experience was much less popular, with supporters most typically extolling the cases of China, Vietnam and Hong Kong and opponents pointing to the cases of Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. Finally, it is characteristic of the debate itself that appeals to public opinion were insignificant.

In summary, the debate about the WTO in the Russian print media became less optimistic and emotional and more focused on discussing terms that affect certain sectors of the economy, making the debate appear somewhat similar to conspiracy-type lobbying.

## 2.2 Arguments of supporters and opponents of Russia's WTO membership

Our analysis of the chosen articles also reveals the arguments that were used in the debate about the WTO (see Table 4). Each article might contain many

**Table 4. Arguments against Russia's accession to WTO**

Argument	Share of articles containing argument	
	Before accession	After accession
Threat to certain economic sectors	41%	40%
Threat to economy as a whole due to uncompetitiveness of Russian producers	56%	27%
Limitation on support for undeveloped industries	13%	11%
Increase in low-quality imports (GMOs, etc.)	7%	7%
Reduced taxes	6%	4%
Increased unemployment/lack of new workplaces	6%	2%
Threat to national food security	5%	1%
Russia's unpreparedness for accession	4%	1%
Threat to national sovereignty	1%	1%
Price inflation	0%	1%
Absence of qualified negotiators to promote Russia's interests in trade agreements	0%	4%
Possible claims/complaints of other countries against Russia	0%	8%

arguments. The opponents of Russia's membership in the WTO most often mentioned the threat to certain economic sectors or the Russian economy as a whole due to the general uncompetitiveness of Russian producers.

Table 4 shows that politicized arguments, such as arguments related to threats to Russia's sovereignty and food security, were unpopular. The discussion was primarily centered on the economy and moved from discussing the WTO's impact on the Russian economy as a whole to examining problems related to particular industries.

It is characteristic that with accession to the WTO, the list of "worries" expanded rather than contracted. Following accession, the list included the risk of possible lawsuits due to Russia's discriminatory economic policy, along with the lack of qualified negotiators to defend national interests within the WTO infrastructure. Prior to August 2012, the debates did not mention those threats.

Supporters of Russia's membership of the WTO sought to prove that accession would create an impetus for development, reduce prices and ease Russian companies' entry into foreign markets (see Table 5). Incidentally, WTO support-

ers never commented on the fact that Russia became the world's leading grain exporter without being a WTO member.

Supporters relied heavily on economic arguments, whereas geopolitical arguments (Russia's world prestige, the prospect of OECD membership) were not very popular. It is important to note that the argument that the WTO would be an impetus for economic development lost its popularity in the mass media: before accession it was mentioned in nearly every fifth article in support of the WTO; after accession it was mentioned in only every tenth article. Foreign investment and competition arguments also became less popular. On the other hand, the most widespread reasons in favor of the WTO related to reduced prices for imported goods and easier access to foreign markets. Thus, the discussion shifted from addressing a broad spectrum of WTO benefits towards debating export opportunities and consumer gains. Other suggested benefits of the WTO (access to investment, impetus for development, competition, etc.) gradually faded away, although initially those were the exact arguments used by the campaign to promote Russia's accession.

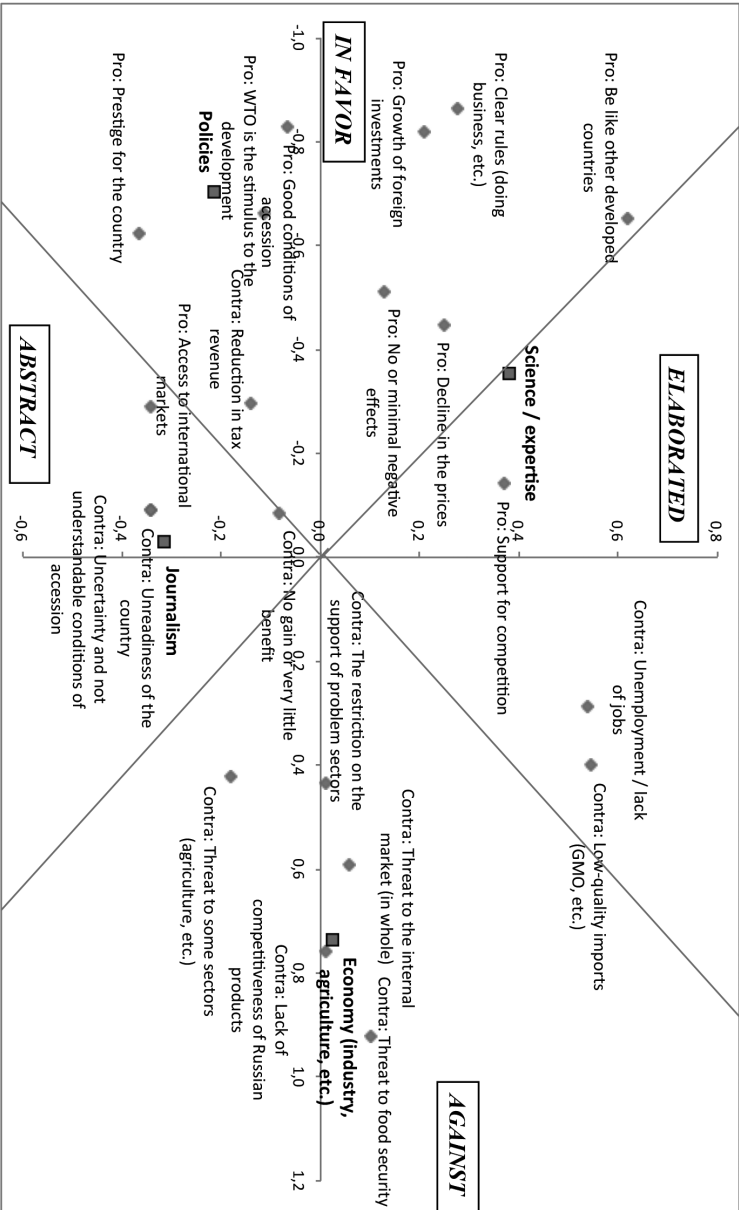
### 2.3. Standpoints of business, government and expert communities

To reconstruct the standpoints of businessmen, experts and government authorities, we attempt to generalize those communities' arguments *before* and

**Table 5. Arguments in favor of Russia's accession to WTO**

Argument	Share of articles containing each respective argument	
	Before accession	After accession
WTO as an impetus for development	32%	14%
Reduction in consumer prices	19%	10%
Entrance to foreign markets	17%	11%
Foreign investment	13%	3%
Minimal/no negative consequences	10%	9%
Increasing Russia's prestige	9%	1%
Straightforward rules	7%	1%
Favorable terms of accession	6%	3%
Impossibility of falling behind	3%	1%
Possibility of OECD membership	3%	1%

Figure 4. Character of argumentation among different debaters in WTO discussions (before accession)



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Note: the graph shows the results of correspondence analysis. It is a graphical visualization of a cross-tab. For detailed description of method and ways of interpreting results see Greenacre & Hastie, 1987; Martin, 2015.

after Russia's accession to the WTO. Figure 4 reveals the distribution of these standpoints along two dimensions: 1) either favoring or rejecting accession (horizontal axis); and 2) relying on either abstract or more elaborated arguments (vertical axis).

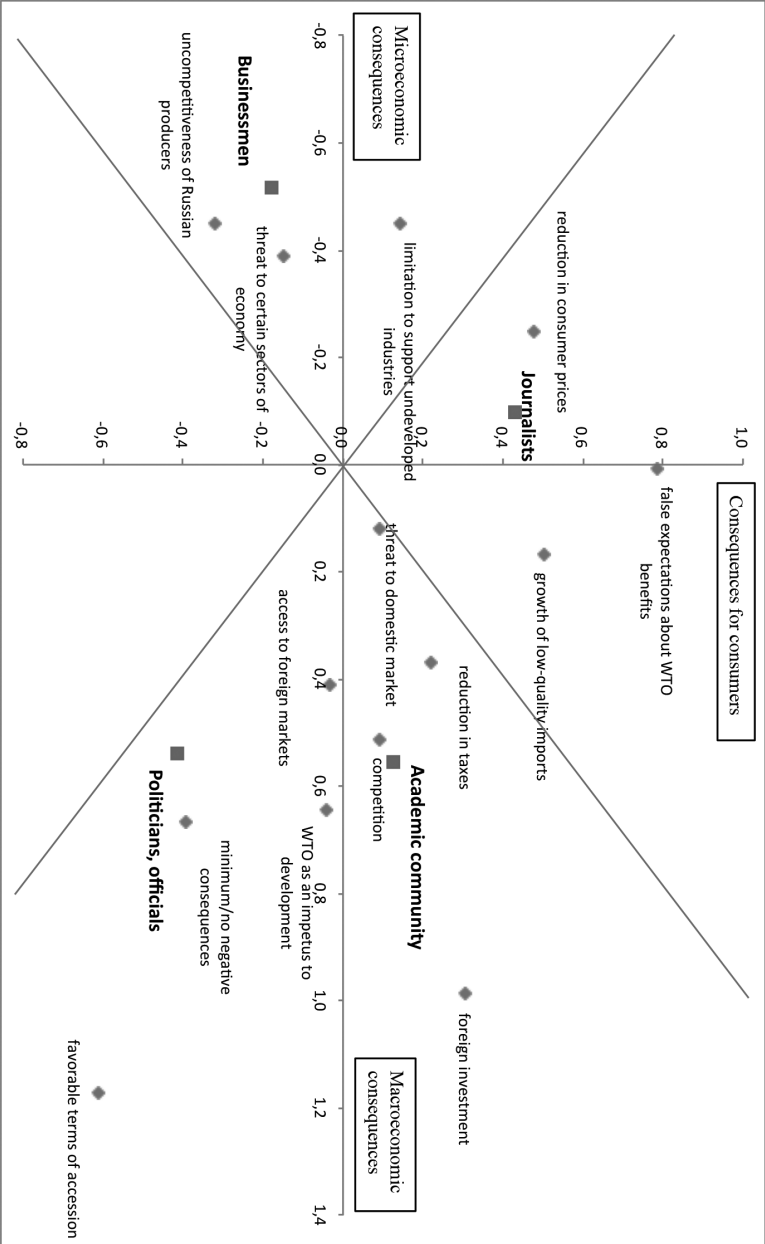
Our analysis shows that the more active opponents of Russia's accession in the Russian print media are from the business community. The most critical response to accession is observed among agricultural producers and producers of agricultural machinery, and their responses are directly related to the situation in their economic sectors and their unpreparedness to compete in the absence of active state support. Those sectors of the business community that in fact had reasons to favor the WTO did not participate in public discussion at all, allowing government officials and politicians instead to engage in all of the agitation.

WTO opponents explained their negative reaction by referring most often to arguments such as threats to domestic markets and particular economic sectors, the general uncompetitiveness of Russian producers and the WTO-imposed limits on state support for undeveloped industries. Businessmen who used these arguments were usually more abstract in their reasoning than the academic expert community; however, they were substantially more precise than authorities and journalists.

The most active WTO supporters in the Russian media were found among government officials, particularly those in the Ministry of Economic Development, along with ruling-party parliamentary deputies (Edinaja Rossiya [United Russia]). Their opponents from opposition parties abstained from the discussion, which resulted in the illusion of complete consensus on the issue. The few attempts by opposition parties to block Russia's accession to the WTO were rather inconsistent and fragmentary, and opposition leaders made very little use of the mass media to promote their arguments to a wider audience.

However, the agitators in favor of Russia's accession to the WTO primarily relied on abstract judgments and arguments. The only possible loss, which they openly acknowledged, was a possible reduction in tariffs. The most popular arguments to promote the WTO's generally positive impact on Russia's economy were the potential increase in foreign investment and the positive influence of increasing competition.

Figure 5. Character of argumentation among different debaters in WTO discussions (after accession)



Note: the graph shows the results of correspondence analysis. It is a graphical visualization of a cross-tab.

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The academic community, which also participated in the public discussion, represented a minority, but generally favored Russia's accession. However, their optimism was quite reserved because they were more aware of the possible risks and threats that the WTO could bring. Their arguments were also highly precise and elaborated.

Experts' primary concern was the possible growth of unemployment, the weakening of control over product quality and an increase in GMO imports. In popular newspapers, experts usually accepted the role of consumer advocates. However, it should be noted that at the time of the WTO debate, the academic community was itself undergoing a serious reform, which may to some extent have affected its ability to promote particular arguments in the public discussion. Being well aware that the government itself supported Russia's accession to the WTO, the academic community apparently abstained from active debates in favor of focusing on the problems of consumers rather than those of producers.

Most of the abstract argumentation on the WTO is found among journalists, who failed to present any unified opinion about WTO membership to the wider audience. On the one hand, journalists attempted to sensitize the public by articulating Russia's general unpreparedness for the accession process, along with the unclear and uncertain terms of the accession. On the other hand, journalists were also highly critical of "primordial protectionism" and declared that joining the WTO would open foreign markets to Russia.

In general, the standpoints of debaters before Russia's accession can be summarized as follows: the *business community* clearly *rejected* the accession; *government, politicians and officials* were explicitly in favor of the accession; the *expert community favored* the accession, although to a lesser extent, dictated by their naturally higher awareness of the risks; *the journalist community* remained highly *uncertain*, depending largely on their publications' ideological stance; and *the mass media served mostly as a platform for the intense debate that unfolded between the authorities and businessmen.*

Politicians accepted their role as a "progressive-thinking" community with a primary objective of helping Russia to keep up with world tendencies and overcome the gap in its development, whereas businessmen openly resisted this intention in favor of protectionist measures by positioning themselves as a nationally oriented bourgeoisie struggling against the cosmopolitan views of the



**Table 6. Debaters' standpoints**

Sphere of origin	Before accession		After accession	
	Standpoint towards accession	Level of argumentation	Focus of discussion	Participation in discussion
Business	Rejected decisively	A balance of abstract and elaborated arguments	Problems of certain industries and economic sectors	Increased
Authorities	Favored decisively	Highly abstract	Problems of economy as a whole, political dividends	Decreased
Academic experts	Favored moderately	Highly elaborated and evidence-based	Problems related to consumer markets	Decreased
Journalists	No clear standpoint	Mostly abstract	Problems related to consumer markets (quality of goods, GMO imports, prices, etc.)	Increased

political and academic elites. Indeed, businesses actively relied on patriotic discourse and urged the necessity of protecting particular industries, which would quite possibly be devastated by Russia's accession to the WTO.

This fight ended in August 2012, when Russia finally became a WTO member. The discussion then shifted to discussing the consequences of accession. Did anything change in the eyes of business, the authorities, experts and journalists?

After Russia's accession, all of the judgments about its consequences can be roughly classified into three domains: consequences for consumers, for producers (micro-consequences) and for the economy as a whole (macro-consequences) (see Figure 5).

Businessmen essentially stopped discussing the macro-consequences of the accession after Russia joined the WTO. The spectrum of their arguments contracted significantly and became too focused on the risk posed by the accession to particular industries. On the other hand, the expert community largely repeated its attention to the WTO's impact on the macroeconomic situation. However, that community was also quite concerned with the microeconomic consequences for consumers. In contrast, government officials tended to interpret real and potential changes related to the WTO accession from the producers' point of view. Finally, journalists accepted the role of consumer advocate by focusing on such issues as reduced prices, GMOs and low-quality imports (see Table 6).

## CONCLUSIONS

The negotiations for Russia's accession to the WTO took 18 years to complete. Throughout this entire period, Russia's intention to join the WTO was constantly debated in Russia's mass media. However, the intensity of this discussion, along with the standpoints of the debaters themselves, was never stable. Relative indifference to the WTO issue in the 1990s was replaced by broad interest in the 2000s. Postponement of the accession date due to various unresolved issues was always followed by a decrease in interest, whereas each success of Russia's negotiators revived the discussion. In addition, it was not until the spring-summer of 2012, when the accession finally took place, that the WTO issue became the most heavily sensitized. Moreover, since that time, the debate has gradually faded.

After comparing the character of this discussion in the Russian print media before and after the accession, one may summarize by saying that the debate became less optimistic and emotional and more focused on the terms that affect particular economic sectors. Most attention was given to the problems of Russian agriculture and pork producers. The change in the character of the discussion was primarily associated with a change in the composition of debaters. Politicians and officials—the major supporters of Russia's accession to the WTO—abandoned the debate soon after Russia became a member. Those debaters were primarily replaced with representatives of the business community, who were largely skeptical about the usefulness of Russia being a part of the WTO on the terms that were eventually accepted. After the accession, businessmen tried to turn their skepticism into a legitimate form of lobbying by demanding more state support and preferences to mitigate the losses caused by Russia's WTO membership. The assertion of devastating effects for certain sectors of the Russian economy was an attempt to manipulate public opinion, thus legitimizing the demand for additional state support.

And these efforts were not in vain. For example, pork producers as the most active media campaign participants (not only in print media, but also on TV and radio) received government subsidies. Moreover, the government further supports local producers by occasionally finding a threat to citizens' health from imported pork. For instance, in February 2013 Russia banned meat imports from the USA, justifying the move by the growth stimulators used in the USA. The ban on pork imported from the EU was justified by African Swine Fever (detected in Poland and in Lithuania). Clearly these actions were connected with the political

confrontation between Russia and the West. More specifically, in the first case the ban coincided with the Magnitsky Act, and in the second case with the conflict with the EU over Ukraine. Nevertheless, pork producers managed to benefit from the situation by leveraging the political context. The image of “victims” (of Russia’s accession to the WTO) created in the media played an important role here. Producers successfully leveraged the “victim” role (created through media campaigns) and became major recipients of government subsidies.

Despite the fact that the Russian media are not completely independent, and are under pressure from the authorities, in the debate on Russia’s WTO accession the positions of supporters and opponents of the decision were equally represented. Thus, we may assume that, in spite of the existing restrictions, different sides of the debate had the opportunity to express views on the subject in the public space. Therefore, the activity of interest groups significantly influenced the nature of the discussion. In very broad terms, before Russia’s accession to the WTO the primary argument unfolded between optimists (represented by politicians and government officials, i.e., mostly activists) on the one hand, and pessimists (mostly businessmen, i.e., practical people) on the other. Moreover, it was only after accession became a fact that representatives of the business milieu began to take over the argument about the WTO issue in the Russian print media.

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