

The Enemy of My Friend? A Comparative Analysis of Reportage on Ukraine in *Vecherniy Bishkek*

Chunwen Ko, 2025

In this research project, I compared reportage on events in Ukraine in the Kyrgyz newspaper *Vecherniy Bishkek* from two especially volatile periods in Ukraine's recent history—the one-year period after the start of the Euromaidan protests (November 21, 2013–November 20, 2014) and the one-year period after Putin's recognition of the independence of Ukraine's breakaway southeastern regions (February 21, 2022–February 20, 2023). In the post-Soviet sphere, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine both stand out for their relative political instability and frequency of revolutions and regime changes. However, the two states' relations with Russia, the regional hegemon, have developed very differently, as Ukraine has increasingly defied Russian hegemony while Kyrgyzstan has largely remained within Russia's sphere of influence. By elucidating how *Vecherniy Bishkek* portrays events concerning Ukraine's worsening relations, and eventual war, with Russia, Ukrainians' struggle for democratization, and more, I wished to better understand the extent to which Ukraine is seen as a "model" for Kyrgyzstan's own political development and whether representations of events in Ukraine have changed as the conflict between Ukraine and Russia has escalated even further.

I first chose to examine *Vecherniy Bishkek* due to its history as a Soviet state-owned newspaper and its pro-Russian leaning even after independence (Owen), as views reflected in such a newspaper would more likely represent "establishment" stances. After determining appropriate time periods for analysis, I filtered through articles by using "Ukraine" as a keyword, along with examining all articles with relevant tags, such as "military operation in Ukraine." Articles were deemed relevant if they, for example, establish a historical connection or comparison between Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, discuss the direct economic result of the Ukraine–Russia military conflict, highlight the opinions of military or political experts, et cetera. After compiling all articles deemed sufficiently relevant, I tagged each article with its primary theme and, if the article consists of or partially contains reprinted information from another news outlet, the country or "block" (e.g. the West) of origin of the news outlet, from which *Vecherniy Bishkek* reprinted information, was also noted.

A significant finding was that *Vecherniy Bishkek* relied on reportage from Russian news outlets to a similar extent in both time periods, but that qualitatively, content reprinted from Russia represented a wider range of views in the first time period than in the second. Another significant finding was that original reportage in the first time period tended to be much more sympathetic toward Ukraine and inclusive of Ukrainian perspectives, while original reportage in the second time period was generally oppositional, even propagandist at times, toward Ukraine. Lastly, I examined possible explanations for these changes, including increasing restrictions placed on Russian media, democratic backsliding in Kyrgyzstan under president Japarov, and the heightened risk of opposition to Russia.

Faculty mentor: Laura Henry

Funded by the Bowdoin Research Award

Reference: Owen, Catherine. "Making Friends with Neighbors?: Local Perceptions of Russia and China in Kyrgyzstan." *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 04, no. 03 (Fall 2018): 457–80. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740018500185>.