

# THE CRISIS IN CRIMEA – “VOICES” FROM CANADA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

With the movement of Russian troops into the Crimean peninsula, and the subsequent vote on secession from Ukraine and joining with Russia, many voices wanted to be heard. The focus of this study is to provide insight as to the views from an interested, but arguably neutral player in the discussion; the second largest country in the world, but one with the third largest population of those with Ukrainian heritage outside of Ukraine and Russia, Canada. Newspaper articles from the period of the crisis from February and March 2014 were collected and analyzed. The articles were published in three national newspapers and also three newspapers with a significant population of those with Ukrainian heritage. Evidence from this sample of suggests that there was a dominance of negative coverage as to the role of Russia consistent with prior research. The articles reviewed were found to present non-neutral coverage particularly through opinion pieces, which also tended to be both longer and more frequently published than neutral, or alternative articles.

**Keywords:** Crimean crisis, Canada, newspaper articles, content analysis

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15549/jeeecar.v1i2.63>

## INTRODUCTION

When regional and world events occur, it is not only the players that are directly involved in the situation that take a position in its outcome. Often there are many voices that wish to be heard. With respect to the Crimean crisis, there were two directly involved countries, Ukraine and Russia, but there were also regional interests such as the neighboring countries (including those that have large Russian speaking minorities). These countries raised the speech as to the what, why (now), and future of both the geographic integrity of Ukraine itself, but of equal importance, the question of who has a say in these types of international interests.

The focus of this study is to provide insight as to the views from such a third party, that of the second largest country in the world, Canada. But why Canada? Although Canada's vast land mass results in a border with Russia in the north, Canada has little direct connection to either country in terms of significant trade and history, but what Canada does have is a very large population of Canadians with Ukrainian heritage. This is particularly strong in Canada's three Prairie Provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba:

The Prairie provinces absorbed the bulk of the first two waves of immigration, displaced persons settled mainly in Ontario... in the early 1990s, approximately 15 per cent of the residents of *Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Saskatoon* had at least some Ukrainian heritage. In 2006, 52 per cent of Ukrainian Canadians resided in the Prairie provinces.

(<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/ukrainian-canadians>)

A secondary focus of this study is to better understand if the examination of published media opinions and perspectives from a “neutral” perspective are more or less likely to provide a balance against similar media assertions

of those directly involved in a conflict; in this case, Ukraine and Russia. There is an extensive history of research that has examined the question of “truth” as it pertains to what is published in newspapers (Wattenberg, 1937). There also exist a number of studies that have compared how different countries have reported the same event such as the Holocaust (Holmila, 2011), and the war in Iraq (Rusciano, 2010). What has been less studied, has been the contribution of such an analysis in terms of the historical interpretation and legacies of ongoing and dynamic events as they unfold.

The definition of the term “neutral” is drawn from the lexicon of sport, particularly international football, to denote those that are actively involved in a situation (i.e. a football match) but are not directly part of either team. Thus for this study, a “Neutral country” is defined as one that does not have a direct involvement in a geopolitical occurrence, but does take a position in the situation. As noted, one could argue that Canada is not a neutral country, given the stated size of the Canadian population with Ukrainian heritage. In the 2011 Canadian census, Ukrainian was Canada's ninth largest ethnic group, and the third-largest Ukrainian population outside of Ukraine and Russia (1.2 million, compared to the 500 thousand with Russian heritage in Canada) (Canadian Census, 2011). By comparison the United States with a population over nine times that of Canada has less than 1 million of Ukrainian heritage (<http://usa.mfa.gov.ua/en/ukraine-us/ukrainians-in-us>).

In order to better understand the position of a country such as Canada in the Crimean situation, newspaper articles that focused on the issue were collected and analyzed. The articles that were examined were published in three national newspapers and also three newspapers with a significant population of those with Ukrainian heritage. The period of analysis covers the days leading up to the start of the tensions until days that followed the

secession vote in Crimea. Thus the study takes a qualitative research perspective of investigation.

### RESEARCH BACKGROUND

There exists extensive literature about the role of the press in terms of framing the discussion about world events from a domestic perspective (Holtz-Bacha and Strömbäck, 2012). Although the neutrality, or the more correctly stated independence of the press, even in open democracies, the media historically often taken specific positions on events based on the ownership or stated philosophy of the organization (Streitmatter, 2012).

There are numerous examples of the impact of newspapers articles on shaping political views. The media in Great Britain have been credited with its modernization (Anthony, 2012; Ross, 2008), while the seeds of the revolutions in France (Leith, 1974) and Cuba (Guerra, 2012) were often attributed to being moulded by the publishing of newspapers and commentaries. The introduction of the radio to the masses in the 20th century, also helped to both inform and influence political opinions (Welch, 1993).

Although newspapers were selected as the media of analysis, other types of media have been used to better understand this type of research. Following the radio age, as noted by Drummond et al. (1993), the introduction of television played a large role of the shaping of political positions, particularly in countries such as the United States. The presidential campaign of 1960, between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon represented one of the earliest examples of where the medium of television was attributed to have had an effect on the outcome of an election (Druckman, 2003). This tradition has continued to the present day through the use of the online media (Berenger, 2013).

### The Crimean Situation – Voices from Canada

The government of Canada’s position on the Crimean situation mirrored that of many nations. There was stated support for the 1994 Budapest Declaration’s commitment to Ukraine’s territorial sovereignty, and Canada’s Prime Minister Stephen Harper openly stated support for Ukraine, and denouncement of the actions of Russia (Chase, 2014). This position was also supported by all national parties, as evidenced by a unanimous motion was passed by the Canadian parliament on March 3 condemning Russia’s actions in the Crimea (Janus, 2014).

Canada’s support mirrored that of many but not all countries. Armenia, Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua, North Korea, Sudan, Syria, and Zimbabwe to various degrees supported, or did not oppose Russia’s actions. The Canadian media discussed this support and provided detailed descriptions of why these countries would support Russia’s action (Matthews, 2014). There was also criticism of Canada’s position by Russia specifically, and others who openly questioned Canada’s stance due to the lack of trade relations between the two countries, the hollowness of any sanctions that Canada could impose, and the stated Ukrainian heritage population in Canada (Mandryk, 2014; Zhyznomirska, 2014).

### Data Collection

As the focus of this research was to provide a greater understanding of the Crimean crisis, from a third party/nation perspective, it was determined that qualitative research methods would be employed. The selected methodology was that of content analysis of newspaper articles (Brunskill, 1976). In this case it was an analysis of newspaper stories about the Crimean situation from the period of February 23rd until March 31st, 2014. The starting date represents the day after the end of the Sochi Winter Olympics, and the end date represents a period after the vote and annexation of the Crimean peninsula to Russia.

The source of the articles for analysis, were three national newspapers and three local/regional newspapers. The national newspapers were, The National Post ([www.nationalpost.com](http://www.nationalpost.com)), The Toronto Star ([www.thestar.com](http://www.thestar.com)) and the Globe and Mail ([www.theglobeandmail.com](http://www.theglobeandmail.com)). These newspapers represent a total circulation over six million readers a week, and all have a printed copy readily available across Canada. All three papers are based out of Canada’s largest city Toronto, Ontario.

The three local/regional newspapers selected were the Edmonton Journal ([www.edmontonjournal.com](http://www.edmontonjournal.com)), published in the capital city the province of Alberta; The Star/Phoenix ([www.thestarphoenix.com](http://www.thestarphoenix.com)) published in the largest city in the province of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon; The Winnipeg Free Press ([winnipegfreepress.com](http://winnipegfreepress.com)), published in the capital city of Manitoba. Not surprisingly these three, in comparison to the national newspapers, have a smaller 1.5 million readers a week, but were selected as these cities, and provinces, as noted, represent the largest concentration of Canadians with Ukrainian heritage.

**Table 1.** Newspapers Reviewed and Total of Articles – Feb. 23 – Mar. 31, 2014

<u>Newspapers</u>	<u>Number of Articles Feb. 23 – Mar. 31</u>
Globe & Mail (National)	58
National Post (National)	56
Toronto Star (National)	56
Edmonton Journal (Provincial - Alberta)	30
StarPhoenix (Provincial - Saskatchewan)	44
Winnipeg Free Press (Provincial - Manitoba)	09

The stated purpose and mission of the newspapers varied. For example, The Edmonton Journal’s mission statement is, “to provide relevant and reliable news and

information to the Edmonton community”, and The Globe and Mail’s, while not official, is “Canada’s newspaper of record”. There are a number of Ukrainian newspapers in Canada including the Ukrainian News (Edmonton); Ukrainian Voice (Winnipeg); and new sections on the site of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress (<http://www.ucc.ca>), but none of the newspapers selected for the study would be considered overt voices for Ukrainian issues and causes.

The newspapers were searched using the ProQuest database system for the stated period of study. Article titles were searched looking for the terms; “Russia”; “Crimea(n)” and “Ukraine(ians)”. The search resulted in 253 unique articles. Table I summarizes the totals by each publication.

### DATA ANALYSIS

As this study utilized qualitative research techniques, the newspaper articles were analyzed using both content analysis (Scharrer, 2002), and modified thematic analysis (Ponnam & Dawra, 2013). Content analysis was conducted by way of key words counts, while the identification of themes was determined by expert analysis and operationalized by way of word cloud generation (Puretskiy et al., 2010).

As stated above, the key words of “Russia”; “Crimea(n)” and “Ukraine(ians)”, were selected to guide the search of the newspapers. Although in general for content analysis the process attempts to establish the key word categories or themes of interest from the data itself, as the focus of this research was a specific event or occurrence, the words selected for search aligned with that purpose (i.e. the Crimean situation).

After the search of the key words, the article titles were reviewed to come up with descriptive words that would provide a greater understanding of the position of the article. The search, by way of content analysis resulted in a list of ten key words (see Table 2) that were mentioned more than once in an article title, representing 64, or approximately 25% of all the articles.

**Table 2.** Summary of Key Word Descriptors

<u>Key Word</u>	<u>Number of Articles</u>
Crisis	18
West(ern)	13
Sanctions	06
Protest(ors)	05
Conflict	05
Aggression	04
Standoff	04
East(ern)	04

Support	03
Chaos	02

The next step was to take the 10 terms and group and assign the instances into categories. As used by Jones et al. (2010), the purpose of the themes selected was to present a consolidation of the phenomenon of interest in a way that allows for interpretation and discussion. The themes can occur at an observable level (i.e. the number of articles per newspaper), or at a latent level, in which the themes indirectly indicate the aim or focus of the article or the overt or implicit position of the publication.

For this research, the focus was on examining if there are any identifiable similarities or differences in the tone of the discussion of the Crimean situation based on the scope of the newspapers’ audiences (i.e. national or regional). Based on the ten key words, there the articles generated three latent themes, which are named Participants [(West(ern); East(ern); Protest(ors)]; Action [Aggression; Support; Sanctions]; and Response [Crisis; Chaos]. The categories of classification theme were made by the author, and were reviewed with independent judges who supported the classification scheme (Cunningham et al, 2000). The value of such a classification scheme is to provide greater insight to the role of “National” and “Local” newspapers in providing readers with a similar or different view of the “truth”. For example, in relative terms, the “National” newspapers, being that they have a larger and more varied readership, would intuitively see their role in terms of more informative and explanatory articles, while the “Local” newspapers, with a higher concentration of readers of Ukrainian heritage would see their role as aligning more with their audience, who it would be assumed would also be consuming news on the Crimean crisis from Ukrainian media outlets. The focus of the published articles would be more on what should be done, rather than what has been done. The summary of the classifications is shown in Table 3. Alternatively, due to the nature of qualitative research methods, it can be argued that the reviewed articles merely reflect the views of the Canadian people.

**Table 3.** Classification of Key Themes by Publication

<u>Key Theme</u>	<u>Number of Articles</u> <u>National</u>	<u>Number of Articles</u> <u>Provincial</u>
Participants	17	07
Action	09	04
Response	15	02

### Additional Classifications

As the selection of newspapers for analysis were solely Canadian, there was an expectation that the “Canadian” perspective of the Crimean situation would take a role of prominence. In order to determine the level of “Canadian-

ness” of the articles published during the period of study, additional categories for analysis were created. There were four such categories, which are “Political”, “Educational”, “Local” and “Balanced”. These are reviewed in turn.

“Political” articles relate to how the situation in Ukraine was used to develop, support, or promote Canadian political motives. Examples included overt references to the use of the situation for local political motives, “Ukraine: Politicizing Foreign Affairs” (Toronto Star, March, 1, 2014), as well as the role of the government’s reaction to the event in Ukraine, “Harper at his Best on Crimea File” (National Post, March 26, 2014). Other articles consisted of documenting the purely partisan rhetoric, and the politicizing of governmental actions with respect to the situation, such as “Statesmen missing on the this plane; Wrong to bar NDP, Liberals from Ukraine trip” (National Post, February 28, 2014) which related to the Canadian government not allowing opposition members of parliament from taking part in a trip to Ukraine during the crisis.

The second category, “Educational” includes pieces that provided readers with a greater understanding of the history of the Crimean peninsula. There were articles that delivered specific insights on the historical context of Crimea “Crimea has long history at centre of regional conflicts” (Globe and Mail, February 27, 2014), and more general overviews of Ukraine, “Some Facts about Ukraine” (National Post, March 1, 2014). As the crisis and the subsequent succession vote drew near, contextual insights as to what may occur next were published, “A Crimean history lesson; Too many dead; Russians will never accept loss of Crimea” (National Post, March 6, 2014).

“Local” articles were those that applied the Crimean situation from a local/regional Canadian perspective. These articles were found in the three newspapers from the provinces with large Ukrainian heritage populations. There were examples of articles that specifically placed the conflict within the context of the local population, “Saskatchewan’s Ukrainian community rallies” (Star-Phoenix, February 24, 2014), as well as the impact of the crisis on local Ukrainian programs, “Crimea puts University of Alberta Alumnus in spotlight; Ukraine’s New Foreign Minister Studied Here”, (Edmonton Journal, March 7, 2014). Larger Ukrainian issues and events were also found in the regional newspapers. “The Roots of Ukrainian Immigration Survive and Grow”, (Star-Phoenix, March 4, 2014) and summaries of Canadian based events that related to the crisis, “Hundreds Show Support for Ukraine at Rally”, (Edmonton Journal, March 13, 2014) being representative examples.

The fourth category of articles labelled, “Balanced” were those articles that attempted to provide an alternative voice (i.e. Russian), or one that helped to present a greater understanding of why the Crimean situation was happening. Not surprisingly there were few that fell into this category (i.e. 3), which included one that linked Ukrainian corruption, “Ukraine’s Legacy of Serial Oligarchy”, (Globe and Mail, March 14, 2014) and a summary of those columnists who justified Russia’s position, “Pundits Turn Reality on is head over Crimea Invasion; Mainstream writers Blame Russian Aggression on NATO Expansion” (Edmonton Journal, March 18,

2014).

### Ukrainian and Russian Media Reports

As the review of specific Ukrainian and Russian media reports was outside the realm of the study, a high level summary of media reports with respect to these newspaper reports was made. This was done to address a secondary focus of this research, that a “neutral” country can best provide a more balanced view of the “truth” in comparison to the directly involved players.

In order to provide a comparative analysis, only English language articles that reported about/by Ukrainian and Russia media actions were examined. In terms of Russian media, headlines such as “Crimean authorities to disable biased Ukrainian TV channels” (www.pravda.ru, March 4, 2014); “Most Russians Would Back Kremlin In Case of War With Ukraine, Poll Says” (www.moscowtimes.com, April 1, 2014); and “Top 5 Myths About Russia’s Invasion of Crimea” (www.sptimes.ru, March 11, 2014) supported the expectation that Russian media would be positioned supporting the Russian actions, as well as denigrating Ukrainian concerns. In terms of Ukrainian media, headlines include, “80% of Ukrainians distrust Russian media”, (http://www.ukrinform.ua, May 20, 2014); “Crimea is being converted into a hot spot” (www.day.kiev.ua/en, March 18, 2014); and “Ukraine to sue Russia for \$85 billion in Crimean annexation losses” (www.ukranianjournal.com, June 3, 2014), aligned in a similar manner. Although limited in scope, this type of analysis reinforces the need for analysis of “neutral” voices in being better able ascertain the “facts” of event such as this.

### Word Cloud

Finally, in order to provide a visual interpretation of the newspaper articles, the headlines were entered into word cloud software, Wordle (www.wordle.net). All headlines were first entered into the software. The resulting word cloud is not surprising as the dominant terms, Ukraine, Russia, and Crimea stood out (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Word Cloud of Headlines – Feb. 23 – Mar. 31, 2014

### DISCUSSION

This is one of the first known studies to systematically analyze the tone of specific media coverage of the Crimean

situation in Canada. As a country that, as suggested, is “neutral”, there was a strong consistency in both the number of and tone of the articles reviewed during the period of study. Although one of the aims of a newspaper is to report “the news” (Jones, 2009), the stories examined also provided commentary and rationale for an “anti-Russia” position.

There were few articles that attempted to justify Russia’s annexation of the Crimean peninsula, although as noted the “Educational” articles did provide historical context at the Crimea’s place within Russia/Soviet Union. The results tended to support the popular position of Canadians’ opposition to Russia’s annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and that the vast majority of the articles sided with that position. It may not be surprising that the consistently negative tone about Russia’s action were almost universal for the regional newspapers, but it was of interest to see that some articles did try and both educate Canadian readers about the history of the region, but also to educate readers as to historic examples of other geographic land expansion.

The articles reviewed as they related to Russian President Putin’s personal role in this situation were especially negatively. Of the articles reviewed, almost 10% mentioned Putin directly in the article title only while only five articles mentioned ousted Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich (interestingly Petro Poroshenko who succeeded Yanukovich was not mentioned anywhere in any of the articles). The arguably negative coverage, from a Russian position, attempted to associate the events of the annexation with other Russian actions. There were a number of articles that referred to Russian/Soviet actions in Georgia, South Ossetia, and Kosovo.

The evidence from this sample of articles suggests that multiple newspapers presented a fairly consistent situation. While the articles that reported the news and events in the region tended to include ongoing recaps of the actions occurring in the region, the “commentary” articles were more uniform in their position. Clearly, the dominance of negative coverage as to the role of Russia and the lesser focus on the events in Ukraine that arguably lead to this situation represent an area for questioning. If the role of a newspaper is to present the news as well as commentary, then one may be left with the impression that the editorial policy of the newspapers merely mirrors that of the general public. Alternatively, one could suggest that the lack of significant trade, and limited Russian heritage population in Canada has shaped the discussion. Although it was beyond the scope of this study to address this question, it does help to bring light to the stated concern that the media no longer reports but rather reflects public opinion (McPherson, 2012).

Consistent with prior research, the articles reviewed were found to present non-neutral coverage particularly through opinion pieces, which also tended to be both longer and more frequently published than neutral, or alternative articles. Negative articles were also more likely to focus on the wider context of events occurring in Ukraine and the region while the neutral or alternative position articles tended to strictly address the specifics of the Crimean annexation.

Relatively few positive stories were found within this analysis, with positive being classified with respect to future actions. As the situation in Ukraine continued to be fluid, particularly with the shooting down of a civilian airliner over Eastern Ukraine in July 2014 (Gidda, 2014) by Russian backed separatists in Eastern Ukraine, it can be suggested that this type of research is better suited for analysis of events more distant in the past. This may be a valid criticism, but by examining events within a timely manner, one can get a greater understanding of how the press chooses to both develop a narrative about specific events, but also to better understand the degree in which the media is driven by other outside variables (i.e. in this case the question of political bias for Canadian political parties) principally that of catering to the already established positions of their readers. Finally, the review of articles from Russian and Ukrainian media further supported the value to be gained from examining media reporting from a “neutral” country during ongoing political, social, and economic crises such as this.

### Limitations

As is the case in all qualitative research studies, there are potential limitations (Miller et al. 2013). Firstly, the findings were reflective of the newspapers selected and may not be generalizable to other newspapers, both within and outside of Canada. As stated, the selected newspapers serviced different markets and have different circulation levels, and thus readership, as well as a different management and ownership. Secondly, there is the possibility that some relevant articles were missed as the full newspaper content was not reviewed, which is a challenge in conducting this type of study.

Finally, as the research utilized content analysis of a large number of articles this type of study may benefit from more in-depth qualitative analysis of each article to provide a greater depth or understanding of the newspaper positions. Although there appeared to be little additional information provided by the analysis of utilizing a word cloud, it none-the-less helped to enhance the specific text analysis, for this type of study further manipulation of the terms may also be of interest. It is suggested that this level of analysis could provide an enhanced understanding of more nuanced and potentially other biased positions based on this types of emotionally charged topic.

### CONCLUSIONS

It can be argued that the predominance of the negative coverage, as it pertains to the actions of Russia, helped to shape Canadian opinion and understanding of the situation in Ukraine and the Crimean peninsula. Alternatively it can be suggested that the newspapers, both regional and national, were merely reflecting existing beliefs by Canadians and Ukrainian Canadians about Russia and the regime under President Putin, and that the specifics of the actions as they related to the Crimean situation were accepted as fact as they aligned with these preconceived ideas. What is questioned is the role that these types of articles could or did play in terms of actually educating the reader as to the situations in the region, and provided a balanced context in terms of allowing the reader to make

up their own mind.

In brief, with the ever-greater challenges that newspapers face in terms of declining readership and economic struggles, this type of study helps to raise attention to how politically charged actions are interpreted and supported or refuted. It is suggested future inquiry could utilize this type of research methodology for similar newsworthy events particularly those with strong ethnic, cultural, and historical significance.

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