

## How to Manage Public Condemnation: Political Scandals in Russia

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The transformation of political communication entails a change in the criteria for evaluating the behavior of political actors, including the violations they commit. This article aims to identify the strategies through which stakeholders influence a scandal, intending to mitigate negative consequences and achieve their own strategic goals. Based on the identified institutional and personal impact on the sequence of scandalous events, we analyze corruption, sex, and power scandals in Russia using the process-tracing method. Besides shifting the agenda through the creation of media leads, the dissemination of protest symbols has proved to be fruitful. The results of the analysis also reveal the advantages of the denial strategy in the Russian context, despite the dominant belief that it is inefficient. Aside from scandal management strategies, we single out contextual factors common to all types of scandals: solidarity, social significance of the offense, and a focus on stereotypes.

*Keywords: political scandal, mediated scandal, Russia, scandal management, media effects, process tracing, strategy*

Political scandals are widely considered to potentially damage politicians' images and political regimes' sustainability (Basinger, 2019; Castells, 2007). As aspects of social capital, reputation and trust are becoming increasingly valuable political resources in the context of the development of the Internet. During the last few decades, scholars have paid considerable attention to political scandals in social theory, as well as a typology of scandalous events (Brenton, 2019; Markovits & Silverstein, 1988; Thompson, 2000), the study of the specific effects of scandals on politicians' popularity and election results (Bowler & Karp, 2004; Dimock & Jacobson, 1995; Jiménez, 2004; Schudson, 2004), and the mechanisms of influencing the political scandal (Entman, 2012; Grolleau, Marciano, & Mzoughi, 2020; Maier, Jansen, & von Sikorski, 2019; Meraz, 2019; Pascual & Berganza, 2019; von Sikorski & Knoll, 2019). However, there has been little discussion of the issue of scandals outside the American and Western European contexts. In particular, the meta-study undertaken by von Sikorski demonstrates this steady trend (von Sikorski, 2018). The theory of

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scandal as such contributes partly to this tendency—the emergence of a scandal is possible only within the framework of regimes in which basic democratic principles, along with respect for the law, are fundamental (Markovits & Silverstein, 1988; Tumber & Waisbord, 2004).

However, several studies have investigated the unfolding of political scandals within a context other than liberal democracy, politics, and media (Lee, 2015, 2018; Oates, 2019; Toepfl, 2011). We believe the distinctive features of regimes and media significantly impact the emergence, development, and consequences of events. Two scandals that are close thematically in the same country may dramatically differ from each other. The actual type of violations, perception of the problem, media coverage, behavior of the main actors—the scandal is a complex political phenomenon in which each of the mentioned characteristics is important.

This article aims to identify a set of strategies in demand among Russian political actors to influence an event's sequence during a scandalous process. Relying on the scandal management concept, we propose an analytical framework that sets apart two ways of scandal management: personal and institutional. Based on the peculiarities of the modern Russian media system, we divide the media into groups following the Toepfl (2020) classification and use their publications to reconstruct the scandal. By examining main stakeholders and their strategies, media activity, media content, causal mechanisms, and outcome, we formulate features that shape scandals in Russia.

### **Scandal Management**

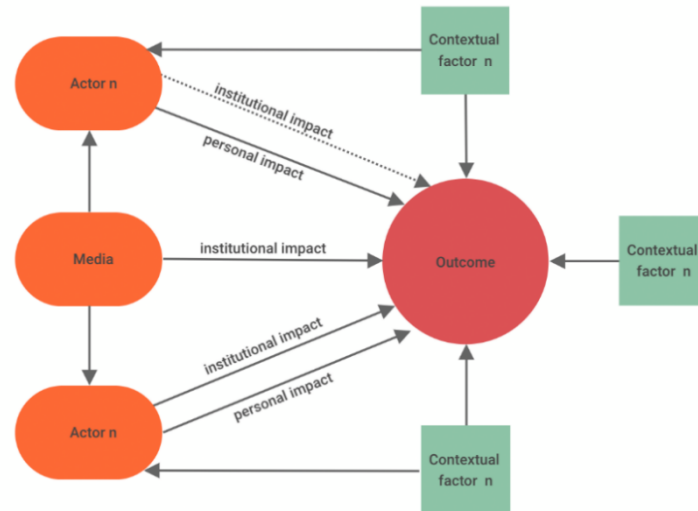
The definition of a scandal as a mediated event was substantiated by Thompson (2000), who proposed a theoretical framework for considering political scandals. In the "social theory of scandals," under which scandals are interpreted as a struggle for symbolic power, while reputation and trust are at stake, he suggests dividing political scandals into three types: sex scandals, financial scandals, and power scandals (Thompson, 2000). These types are differentiated for the convenience of analysis, given that in real life, a scandal may combine features of all types (von Sikorski, 2018).

When using Thompson's (2000) definition today, it is necessary to consider the changes that have occurred in the structure of the media system and the influence of media on politics. Scholars argue that the mediatization of politics led to the situation in which "politics has lost its autonomy, has become dependent in its central functions on mass media, and is continuously shaped by interactions with mass media" (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999, p. 250). Researchers often pinpoint dramatization of politics, among the consequences of mediatization, as an important feature of current political discourse (Kissas, 2019; Mazzoleni, 2014). A political scandal, defined as a "drama of concealment and disclosure" (Thompson, 2000, p. 18), becomes a weighty event in political life and can affect distribution of power. Considering a broader treatment of the concept of scandal outside democratic regimes, it is worth emphasizing that the use of scandals for political purposes allows for "construction" of scandals.

The uncertainty of outcomes of a political scandal causes the politicians' desire to influence the course of public discussion and dissemination of scandalous information. Researchers consider two approaches to comprehending the term *manageability* (Martyanov & Martyanova, 2019). The first, "subject-

object" approach, is identified with unequal interaction status in which the subject formulates the rules of the game and controls their enforcement in the available object's domain. The object's controlled position limits the choice of available alternative behaviors. The grounds and the possibility of controllability in the first model are rooted in the institutional context or stable behavior stereotypes. The second, "subject-subject" approach, considers the role of the managing actor as transient, transferable from subject to subject, and is characterized by free access to the assumption of control functions. Consideration of the term *manageability* in the context of political scandal most likely defines the first model as the determinant, given that the existing principles of influencing the spread of information and public opinion treat the audience not from the perspective of an active communication agent, but from the position of a spectator who is limited to working out either a positive or a negative attitude toward the political actors' deeds. Accordingly, political scandal management is understood within the framework of this article as actions of individuals or institutions aimed at adjusting the level of public discourse as well as the perception of main actors involved in scandalous events, as devised by the set objective.

Two dominant approaches can be distinguished in contemporary studies of political scandal impacts, depending on the subject of influence on the audience: institutional and personal (Figure 1). The first approach examines the effect of institutions, most often government agencies, mass media, or social media, which can apply agenda-setting, priming, and framing as part of their activities (Maier et al., 2019; Pascual & Berganza, 2019; von Sikorski & Knoll, 2018, 2019). The coverage of scandals in a highly competitive media environment can allow certain news outlets to stand out (Tumber & Waisbord, 2019). Maier et al. (2019) distinguish two prevailing political coverage frames, attack frame and defense frame, pointing to a significant predominance of the former. The priming effect is related to the influence of media on the criteria through which people form their evaluative judgments. It is necessary to consider the existence of both explicit judgments and implicit attitudes. For instance, an individual may publicly condemn corrupt behavior while offering bribes himself. If the society has an implicit attitude toward corruption as generally acceptable, beneficial, or a laughable phenomenon, tolerance toward corrupt politicians increases (Pascual & Berganza, 2019).



**Figure 1. The analytical framework of scandal management.**

If a politician has no opportunity to take advantage of institutional scandal management mechanisms, he or she can influence the public perception as an individual political actor. Ware and Linkugel (1973) were among the first researchers to identify four possible strategies: denial, bolstering (seeking to be associated with positive deeds or people), differentiation (attempt to present an effective point of view), and transcendence (transfer from accusation to transcendent categories). However, image restoration theory is better elaborated (Benoit, 1997). It can be applied to the scandal theory because it also considers communication as a determined activity and assumes strengthening of the preferred image as one of the main communication goals. The approach includes several strategies: denial (simple denial, shift the blame), evasion of responsibility (provocation, defeasibility, accident, good intentions), reducing offensiveness of event (bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser, compensation), corrective action, and mortification. An essential complement is the legal response strategy: The politician does not make public statements and prefers to act through legal procedures (Knight, 2014). The differentiation between these strategies does not oblige a politician to stick to only one of them; they can be combined depending on the situation's development.

When exploring the concept of scandal, it is essential to include the contextual factors such as media, political, and cultural particularities influencing scandals' development and the consequences for politicians. Since this article aims to identify the strategies used by actors for managing a scandal, the description of the media system in contemporary Russia makes it possible to determine which platforms may become the principal environment for disseminating a scandal and which may become a rostrum for voicing an apology.

### **Specifics of the Russian Media System**

Researchers distinguish two models to study the concept of the media system (Gavra & Naumenko, 2020). A substantial model treats the media system as a set of actors with common characteristics (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Hardy, 2012). A societal model deals with the media system as a social subsystem that interacts with political and economic subsystems (Flew & Waisbord, 2015; Voltmer, 2008). The second approach offers the benefit of considering not only institutional characteristics of media actors in the scandal but also features of political culture and the nature of economic resources distribution in society. The Russian media system's specifics might considerably complicate the possibility of the emergence and spread of a scandal because of the existing indirect economic and legislative mechanisms devised to influence media resources. For instance, the Russian media system is marked by a combination of the paternalistic role of the state and state capitalism, which is reinforced by conservative political discourse (Kiriya, 2019; Vartanova, 2011). On the one hand, the state determines how traditional media shall operate, controlling and financing the state-owned media, and on the other hand, it assigns ownership of some media to loyal commercial companies.

As Vartanova (2020) notes, "While the provision of news from opposition parties or protest communities via federal broadcast channels was limited, it was the online media, especially social networks with mobile access, which reported alternative news agendas and provided alternative political analysis" (p. 30). A typical feature of all media is free migration of information messages from one media group to another—and different levels of institutionalization or "recognition" in the professional community cannot hinder such migration (Kiriya, 2019).

Those media system features correspond to the Toepfl (2020) model based on the idea of multiple publics. This typology includes three types of public spheres: uncritical publics, policy-critical publics, and leadership-critical publics. The uncritical public comprises citizens who are not inclined to evaluate policies negatively, to the extent that they do not perceive dissatisfaction as a behavior model approved by the authorities; they turn to state-controlled media and state-controlled Internet resources. To legitimize the regime, the state may cultivate the policy-critical publics; they are characterized by a selective negative attitude toward politicians and institutions that have lost credibility, and they prefer information sources that are not obviously managed by the state. Leadership-critical publics publicly express dissatisfaction with political leaders, prefer social media communication, and turn to the media that aggressively and publicly emphasize the oppositional character of their activity.

We assume that leadership-critical media can use scandalous events in nonliberal democracies to increase the level of discontent with the regime and stir political protests. Simultaneously, the state may be interested in holding individual officials liable for their deeds to form the image of struggling with a particular "vice" at the state level. However, if the political leaders are not willing to take risks and tolerate even controlled criticism, they, according to the model, will direct their activities toward forming uncritical publics. In analyzing the political scandals in contemporary Russia, it is necessary to consider the existing media divisions handling the mentioned types of target audience.

### Case Description

The current study focuses on three political scandals that have taken place in Russia. According to Thompson (2000),

What makes [political scandals] political is the fact that they occur within the political field, that they involve individuals who hold or aspire to positions of power within this field and that they have consequences within this field, both in terms of the activities and opportunities of the individuals directly implicated in the scandals and in terms of the actions and responses of others. (p. 123)

We analyze different cases in terms of coverage intensity, the status of acting participants, and the key offense that provoked the scandal (harassment, corruption, or abuse of power) to identify typical practices of the actors involved in the scandal and contextual factors that affect scandal development in the Russian media system. To distinguish between the cases, we apply Thompson's (2000) scandal classification.

The sex scandal involving Leonid Slutsky, member of the State Duma, chairman of the Committee for International Affairs, and a member of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), flared up in March 2018. *Dozhd* correspondent Antonova addressed the leader of LDPR Zhirinovskiy with a request to draw attention to the behavior of Slutsky because the channel's editorial office was approached by some female journalists who complained about harassment on the part of the deputy. Following the publication of accusations, the political elite's original apportioned and neutral position changed to an aggressive one: The State Duma speaker advised the journalists to change jobs. At the same time, the LDPR leader declared that there had been no cases of harassment within the party. Overall, attention toward the scandal was insignificant until March 21, 2018. The scandal's turning point, which stirred citizens' attention to the allegations, was the State Duma's ethics commission's decision. The deputies found no behavioral offense in Slutsky's actions, which triggered the boycotting of the Duma on the part of media outlets that had covered the scandal most actively.

The Arashukov family's corruption scandal originated in January 2019, when Senator Rauf Arashukov was arrested during the Russian Federation Council session on charges of murder and organizing a criminal association. At the same time, his father, Raul Arashukov, was detained in St. Petersburg on charges related to a RUB 30 billion gas theft case. Most of the events were procedural and were not accompanied by additional violations. Generally, some investigations appeared during the period of detainment and confirmation of lawfulness of the Arashukov family representatives' arrest, informing the audience about the "victims" of their activities. Today, the Arashukovs' case is still being considered in court, and the defendants themselves are in pretrial detention.

The third scandal was classified as a power abuse scandal, which "involves the misuse or abuse of political power as such" (Thompson, 2000, p. 196). It was triggered by the detention of *Meduza* investigative journalist Ivan Golunov in the center of Moscow and false accusations of drug distribution. Since the very beginning, the media and the public have focused on the journalist's arrest being due to multiple failures in the legal procedure committed by law enforcement and investigative bodies during the investigation. In this

case, abuse of power by police officers can be treated as use of power for their benefit. Several mass media, public figures, and Golunov claimed that the initiation of a criminal case was revenge for journalistic investigations. Five days after Golunov's arrest, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) dropped all charges and released Golunov for lack of evidence. In addition, a criminal case was opened in November 2019 against the MIA officers who detained Golunov, and only in late May 2021 did the court issue a guilty verdict with a sentence of five to 12 years imprisonment. The case itself aimed to condemn persons liable for Golunov's arrest; the court did not consider searching for possible initiators of the arrest and their motives.

Hence, each of the selected scandals differs in terms of the offense committed by the actors, the status of the actors in the political area, and the act of disclosure. The main actors in each scandal had different access to power resources. When the scandal occurred, Slutsky held a fairly stable position as the chairperson of the State Duma Committee on International Affairs and had the formidable support of the political party. Arashukov was a representative of the Karachay-Cherkess National Republic in the Federation Council, which made his political activities dependent on the national policy of the state and relations between the federal and regional power elites. A unique feature of Golunov's scandal is that the central actor was not an offender, but a victim of the scandal. Golunov had no power resources and was not a public figure. The act of disclosure differs in each case. Information about Slutsky's harassment first appeared on the *Dozhd* TV channel; later, it was dispersed and escalated by the channel. Arashukov's arrest was simultaneously covered by state controlled-media, which suggests that it was preplanned. Information about the detention of Golunov had a viral nature and was spread by various media outlets.

### Research Design

To study each scandal in detail, we chose an explanatory outcome process tracing method, which aims to find an explanation for an outcome in a specific context and trace the cause-and-effect relationships through analysis of the process's development (Beach, 2017). It is also worth emphasizing that every scandal has its life span. The time frame was defined with the help of the Google Trends service, which makes it possible to evaluate the search engine users' interest toward the stakeholders (Appendix 1).<sup>2</sup>

Analysis of each scandal involves analyzing the following variables that influence scandal development:

1. Main stakeholders and their strategies—allows identifying actors and their actions that influence the agenda and draw attention to the offense. To determine the actors' behavior strategy within each of the cases, we used Benoit's image restoration theory (Benoit, 1997); additionally, the strategies of informing, escalating, and protesting were introduced because they allowed for classification of secondary actors' actions (Appendix 2).

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<sup>2</sup> Supplemental information Appendices 1–3 for this article can be accessed at [https://www.dropbox.com/sh/d4kukaogfd66ffz/AADdNzMQ5A3\\_Kzek2OPXtdUxa?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/d4kukaogfd66ffz/AADdNzMQ5A3_Kzek2OPXtdUxa?dl=0)

2. Intensity of coverage or media activity—includes tracking media hits of the scandal in certain media. To investigate media publications and reconstruct the sequential structure of particular scandals, we used media publications following Toepfl's (2020) classification of public spheres within the specified period (Table 1).

The empirical basis comprises texts from the national media on scandals, collected through the Public.ru full-text media database. A total of 3,429 news items were selected (Appendix 3).

3. Role of media content in the scandal—allows determining goal-directed behavior of the media to influence the scandal. We used close textual analysis to determine characteristics of coverage of a certain action in scandal management.
4. Causal mechanisms—allows identifying contextual factors that influence development of the scandal.
5. Outcome—fixes the outcome of the scandal for the central figure.

**Table 1. Russian Media by Publics Type.**

	Uncritical publics	Policy-critical publics	Leadership-critical publics
TV channel	Rossiya 1, Perviy Kanal, NTV		Dozhd
News agency	TASS, RIA Novosti		
Newspaper and online media	Komsomolskaya Pravda	Vedomosti, Kommersant, Moskovsky Komsomolets, RBC, Izvestiya, Argumenty i Fakty	Meduza, Novaya Gazeta, Ekho Moskv, MBKh-Media

The scandals are considered in chronological order.

## Results

### *Sex Scandal*

#### *Main Stakeholders and Their Strategies*

In addition to Slutsky himself, the *Dozhd* TV channel became a functioning actor of the scandal as an institutional entity, taking principal steps for the information spread and escalation. At the same time, the female journalists who accused Slutsky acted on their own behalf only, within the framework of initial charges, when filing a complaint with the State Duma's ethics commission.

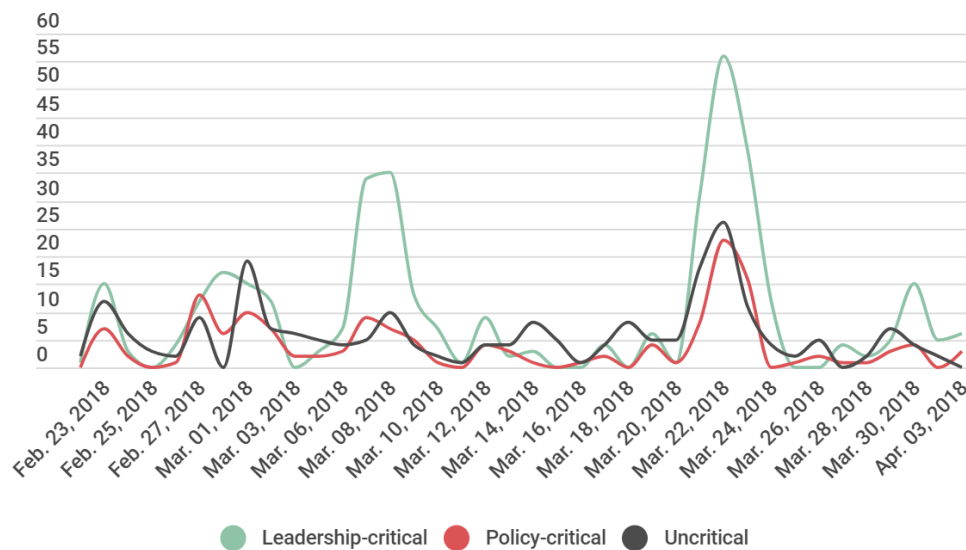
In an attempt to manage the scandal, Slutsky, the scandal's main actor, most frequently used the simple denial strategy within the whole period in question and only once attempted to use the strategy of



accident. He apologized to everyone he had “unwittingly offended” (“Slucky Poposil,” 2018). The apology did not prevent further unfolding of the scandal because it neither compensated for the damage nor represented his admission of guilt. Slutsky’s colleagues were stakeholders, who tried to reduce the offensiveness of events and greatly influenced the scandal’s development. Many deputies expressed their support for him, condemning the female journalists for taking advantage of the situation and trying to defame the politician who was known to be honest and courteous to women. The most common strategies used were blame reduction (there was no premediated malice, the journalists misinterpreted Slutsky’s behavior), transcendence (politicians’ statements that the nation faced more serious problems), attack the accuser (counter-blaming), differentiation (the journalists’ accusations were a political game or a desire to become famous), and minimization (presenting the problem as unimportant). The scandal’s turning point was the manifested “solidarity” of the State Duma deputies recorded in the ethics commission’s decision as the deputies found no behavioral offense in Slutsky’s actions.

#### *Media Activity*

The graph of media hits by media groups shows high activity of the media of the leadership-critical public and comparatively equal activity of the other two media groups (Figure 2). Two main peaks of media activity occurred: During the period March 6–10, when Slutsky posted his apologies on Facebook, which served as an informational trigger for public discussions of the deputy’s actions, and March 20–24, after the post expressing dissatisfaction with the decision of the ethics commission.



**Figure 2. The intensity of the Slutsky scandal’s coverage by various types of media.**

### *Media Content*

Because media coverage shapes the context of scandal perception by the audience, those interested could use the media to disseminate ideas that benefit them. The main strategy of the media serving the uncritical public was to ignore the scandal and shift the focus of public attention to Slutsky's professional activities, using his comments about international events ("Slucky Prokomentiroval," 2018). When the scandal needed to be covered in a separate publication, comments from Slutsky's supporters and colleagues were usually used ("Zhenskij Klub," 2018).

When policy-critical media covered the scandal, they tried to avoid a moral assessment of the scandal, instead expressing their position by joining the boycott (Boleckaya, 2018). In an effort to attack Slutsky, the media of the leadership-critical publics noted the violation of norms by the deputy ("Drug Patriarha," 2018). The condemnation by media was also common when the media outlet stated directly that it did not approve of the politicians' behavior in the given matter ("Geroi-Lyubovniki," 2018). At the same time, the media defended the victims—for example, pointing at the negative manifestations of the deputies' solidarity, implicitly presenting the defense actions as not meeting the proper ethical behavior of State Duma deputies (Sotnikov, 2018).

### *Causal Mechanisms*

First, it was an intensive period in the political cycle—the presidential election captured the close attention of the press and the public. Hence, the politicians could hold the ethics commission session only 18 days after the last submitted application, being engaged in more important problems.

Second, a factor that prevented the scandal from duplicating the Weinstein case in the United States is people's attitude that the significance of harassment as a subject for discussion is exaggerated and that it is the victims who provoke men. A survey conducted by the research company Public Opinion Foundation (2018) on April 16, 2018, shows that more than 77% of the respondents had not heard about Slutsky's harassment before the poll. In comparison, 48% of the respondents believed that both participants were to blame, and 28% accused the harassers.

Third, the solidarity factor worked, in relation both to the culprit (given that the decision of the ethics commission significantly narrowed the options for further development of the scandal) and to the female journalists; it was the boycott of the State Duma by the mainstream media that drew the greatest attention to the problem of the vulnerability of sexual harassment victims.

Fourth, the estrangement of the country's top leadership from the scandal conditioned the localness of the scandal in a certain sense. The presidential administration's position was neutral; the president's press secretary repeatedly stated that the issue was not on the Russian president's agenda. The experience of a live broadcast nationwide phone-in shows that the problem may remain unresolved until it is directly mentioned by the president, who serves as a trigger for introducing changes. *Kommersant* quotes the Russian president's reaction to Slutsky's arraignment—it presents the issue of harassment as an area of personal relationships that should not be discussed publicly but may be handled in court ("Putin Ne," 2018).

Fifth, Slutsky's position should be considered as an additional factor because it is necessary to prove the fact of violation before one is stripped of parliamentary immunity. Force imbalance between Slutsky and the journalists, as well as the difficulty of prosecuting a State Duma deputy, only contributed to the fading of the scandal. Slutsky's strategy of simple denial had a definite impact because any confession on his part could have resulted in legal proceedings; therefore, the deputy preferred to confine himself to minimum reaction, which proved to be a relatively efficient device.

### *Outcome*

The principal consequences of this scandal might be treated as a transfer of the harassment topic to the public domain—the emergence of a situation that could serve as a precedent in the future (which is confirmed by the appearance of other allegations of harassment by journalists). The ethics commission's decision triggered a boycott of Duma on the part of media outlets, mainly those that had covered the scandal most actively (media of the policy- and leadership-critical publics). This decision was principal for the work of more than 40 media outlets for several months since they withdrew their representatives from the Duma and refused to consider Duma member Slutsky as a newsmaker—the manifestation of journalistic solidarity among the media whose members refused to work and be physically present in the State Duma. Slutsky's career could have been ruined after this scandal; nevertheless, no significant change in his official position in the Duma was observed during the period in question. However, Slutsky's failure in June 2019 to run for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe vice president was implicitly attributed to his involvement in the sex scandal.

## ***Corruption Scandal***

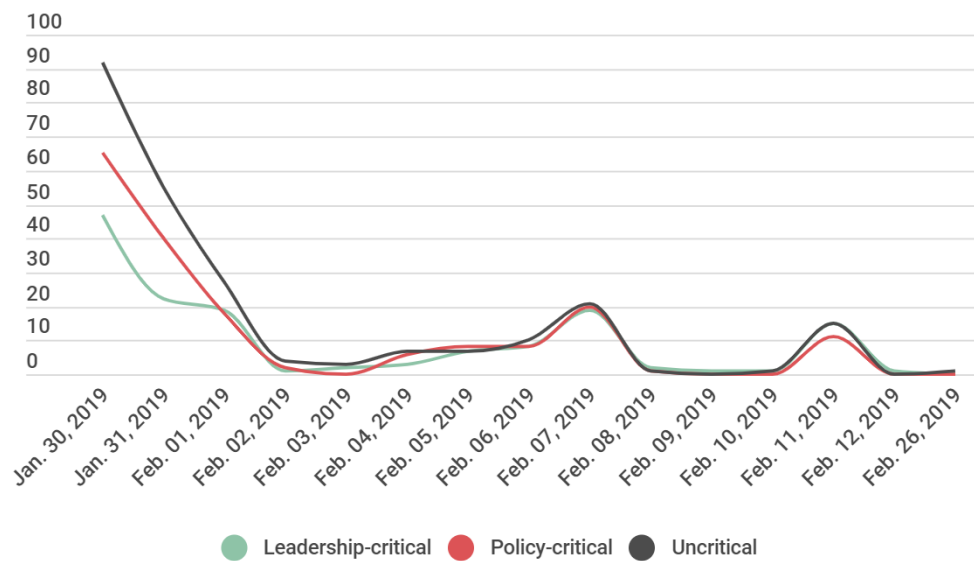
### *Main Stakeholders and Their Strategies*

Apart from representatives of the Arashukov family, the main stakeholders included the state, whose position was formulated by the spokesperson of the Investigation Committee and by information provided by the spokesperson for the Basmany Court. The most visible actor that managed the scandal was the state, whereas other actors operated within the framework established by the state. Each defendant's main strategy was simple denial, with a demonstrative expression of willingness to assist in the investigation. The dominant strategy of the representatives of the judicial and law enforcement systems was informing by way of describing the deeds of which the investigators suspected the Arashukovs of doing.

Another actor was the speaker of the Federation Council, Matvienko, who used the strategy of corrective action to improve the public image of the Federal Council; she recommended tightening the reliability screening procedure for the senators before their appointment to office. She pointed to an accident, not a systematic violation of the law by the elected representatives of the constituent entities. Besides, the condemnation from Arashukov's own camp was fixed; many senators were breviloquent on the day of Arashukov's detention when speaking of the Senator. Moreover, they voted for the resolution to dismiss Arashukov from his office almost unanimously. That is, the collective body's solidarity was directed against the defendant.

### Media Activity

The graph of media activity shows relatively equal media attention to the scandal (Figure 3). Many publications appeared immediately after the members of the Arashukov family were arrested; uncritical public media covered the process in the most detail. After information about the detention was spread, media attention to the case plummeted because of lack of new information about the investigation and the referral of the case to court. The second burst in media interest occurred when the arrest was recognized as legal and additional investigative measures were made. The third peak of media activity is associated with coverage of Matvienko's comments about the Arashukov case.



**Figure 3. The intensity of the Arashukov scandal's coverage by various types of media.**

### Media Content

Detention during the Federal Council session was arranged in a preplanned theatrical fashion, which created an engaging media event and promoted the dispersal of information about the case. The phrase "senator detained at the session of the Federation Council, for the first time in its existence," with varying wording, appeared in the overwhelming majority of news stories about Senator Arashukov's detention ("Senatora Arashukova," 2019, para. 1). In general, the publications on this subject are divided into neutral and assertive. The media of the policy- and leadership-critical publics supported the news reports with information received from the investigating authorities and performed the function of informing the public about the development of the Arashukovs' case (Sadykova, 2019). To provoke negative emotions and substantiate the legitimacy of charges against the corrupt official, the uncritical-public media followed an accusatory strategy, emphasizing breach of norms and focusing on negative personal traits of the

Arashukovs ("Kak Klan," 2019). The media portrayed the Arashukovs as criminals who stole billions and lived in luxury ("Oligarh Iz, " 2019).

### *Causal Mechanisms*

Among the factors that influenced the development of the scandal are the following. First, the very fact of public accusation and arrest (being scandalous factors) and the factually unanimous decision of the senators to strip Arashukov of immunity aimed to strengthen the public belief that a criminal case was initiated for a reason. On the one hand, it is much more likely that this scandal was triggered by the confrontation of power elites and the distribution of power between the Federal Security Service, the Prosecutor's Office, and the regional elites. On the other hand, the state used the scandal to demonstrate the fight against corruption in the top tiers of power.

Second, the subsequent slump of short-term interest in the scandal demonstrates the "resilience" of citizens' perception—people cease to believe in the efficiency of the showcase fight against corruption. This was confirmed by the survey from the Levada Center (2019). Sixty-two percent of the respondents followed the scandal or heard about this corruption case. When answering the question about reasons for detention, 31% of those polled believed that the Arashukov case was a struggle for a repartition of the spheres of influence, 25% considered it a demonstration of a serious struggle against corruption, and 23% regarded the scandal as a means of distraction.

Third, the role of the president, who gave his informal approval for the senator's arrest, must be taken into account in this scandal because it heightens the legitimacy of the process.

Fourth, the uncritical public media coverage serves the interest of the scandal's unidirectional treatment as a fair fight for lawfulness and a public act of combating corruption. However, this uniformity also contributes to a fade-out of the scandal: As soon as all the facts of the scandalous politician's behavior are clarified, the level of interest may disappear.

### *Outcome*

The court is still reviewing the case; the investigation revealed additional facts about the case and involved 20 more people associated with Arashukov.

## ***Power Scandal***

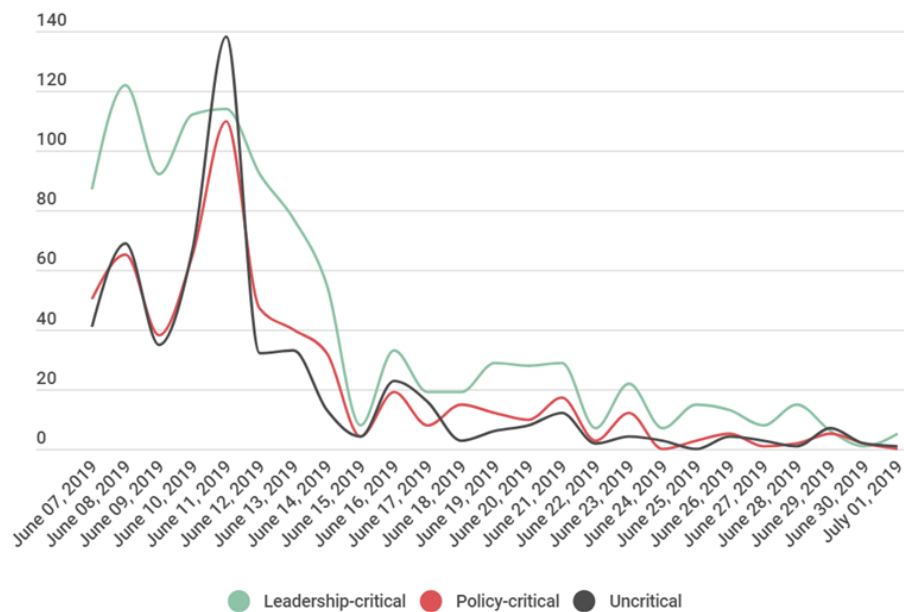
### *Main Stakeholders and Their Strategies*

One of the main actors that influenced the scandal's development was *Meduza* itself, using protest strategies (publication of support videos from opinion leaders, distribution of provocative articles and materials, coverage of offline protest actions) and escalation strategies (preparation of films, mailing forms, participation in the development of "I/We, Ivan Golunov" symbol, publication of photos from the protest venues). Another actor was the officers of the MIA, who initially used a counterattack strategy (detention

of picketers, refusal to carry out due examination) and differentiation (release of materials and comments presenting the investigative bodies' version). Golunov himself predominantly used a simple denial strategy (until the moment of termination of the criminal proceedings), followed by informing and shifting the blame onto the masterminds and perpetrators of the case. Thus, we can see competitive interaction of actors, constantly refuting each other's statements.

#### *Media Activity*

In general, the number of hits regarding this scandal greatly exceeded coverage of other cases discussed (Figure 4). We can figure out two phases of the scandal: the first, June 6–11, 2019, and the second, June 12 to July 1, 2019. The first stage involved investigating the charges against Golunov; it was characterized by heightened media activity and a significant number of variations in the framing of the events. The second stage began June 12—the day of the first mass-scale protest in Moscow and subsequent detentions. During this stage, the events were less impetuous. Leadership-critical media managed the scandal through agenda-setting by publishing a large number of news items. The media focus was shifted to drawing citizens' attention to the issues related to charges of drug possession and the protest actions in support of Golunov and other persons unjustly persecuted, presumably in the same way. That is, one can observe a shift toward an abstract agenda.



**Figure 4. The intensity of the Golunov scandal's coverage by various types of media.**

### *Media Content*

Initially, uncritical public media, in particular, TV, could not agree on a common scandal-covering strategy: *Perviy Kanal* used a distancing strategy at first, but later was included in a discussion of various offenses committed by the investigation authorities ("Ugolovnoe Presledovanie," 2019); the *Rossiia* TV channel was among the first to spread evidence of Golunov's guilt ("V Centre Moskvy," 2019), but later admitted its mistake and the inaccuracy of the information used ("Vyshla Novaya," 2019); and *NTV* provided each of the opposing parties with an opportunity to express its ideas ("Eto Test," 2019). Despite this, the assessment of the law enforcement agencies' actions by the federal channels was restrained.

The media serving the policy-critical public, along with the leadership-critical media, attacked the MIA immediately from the moment of the *Meduza* journalist's arrest, presenting the detention as a violation of norms and the case itself as a public issue for the whole society ("On Zadel," 2019). Moreover, the release of three leads in policy-critical newspapers with the symbol "I/We, Ivan Golunov" boosted attention to the scandal ("Sovmestnoe Zayavlenie," 2019). The symbol was also used by journalist colleagues and people during protests, on the mainstream media sites and on social media.

During the second described period, the number of publications covering the case decreased significantly. Uncritical media continued attacking not the entire structure of the MIA, but specific individuals, and called for their resignation; this was presented as an efficient struggle against officials who break the law, even those wearing a general's insignia ("Uvoleny Dva," 2019). Most of the media of the policy- and leadership-critical public concentrated on discussing possible decriminalization of the pertinent law for illegal acquisition, storage, transportation, manufacturing, and processing of narcotic substances, as well as the coverage of case-related protests, given that the first rally was accompanied by detentions and aggressive actions on the part of the law enforcement officers ("My Znaem," 2019).

### *Causal Mechanisms*

Among the factors that influenced the sequence of events in this scandal, the following can be highlighted. First, Golunov's social and professional position undoubtedly influenced the developing coverage of the scandal. The mainstream media journalists started covering the scandal in detail immediately, which shifted the agenda almost entirely to the realm of drug prosecution and corrupt practices of the law enforcement bodies. "Guild solidarity" is a relatively new phenomenon in the history of scandals in modern Russia. Still, in this case, this factor made it possible to "defend" the colleague within five days, contributing to the decisive factor—the intervention of the country's top management—since the court proceedings would have taken months. The strategies used by the main actors included shifting the agenda by the major media outlets working in the critical-public domain, and covering the event along two lines: attacking the MIA and defending Golunov.

Second, the level of public support and due coverage of protests and pickets gives credence to the moods of reliance on a broad section of the population—ordinary citizens who are discontent with cases of illegal persecution. The public opinion pressure factor presumably accelerated the pace of decision making regarding the case and increased the scale of consequences.

Third, the symbol "I/We, Ivan Golunov" became a distinguishing feature of Golunov's supporters and made it possible to unify people and signify the public's discontent. The symbol was the identification mark for Golunov's supporters and made the expression of a protest position easier. For instance, activists published the symbol on social media and put it on avatars, thereby contributing to the dissemination of information about the scandal. The creation of a symbol for the scandal was a well-targeted strategy that was later used in subsequent criminal cases.

Fourth, the news coverage as an influence strategy was formed through proper selection of facts, frequent mentioning of Golunov's merits, and investigative bodies' blunders—such as publication of inauthentic photos, allegedly related to the search of Golunov's apartment, on the official website of the MIA. Whereas most of the news websites and opposition media tried to present the actions of the MIA in a negative light and to demonstrate the growth of protest moods, state-controlled TV channels used the scandal to illustrate the dismissal of generals as a manifestation of the health of the system and the ability to combat violators, thus demonstrating the integrity of law enforcement.

Fifth, *Meduza* became a newsmaker itself for several days, undertaking steps to transform the agenda. Within the framework of additionally introduced strategies, such as giving open access to Golunov's journalistic investigations, creating designed posters and templates with the "I/We Golunov" symbol for publishing in social media, and accumulating all published information on the topic of the scandal, *Meduza* became an actor that successfully implemented the strategy of escalation.

Sixth, it is noteworthy to consider an essential point of the political cycle within which the scandal took place. Because Golunov's detention happened on the second day of the International Economic Forum in St. Petersburg, the federal officials had to answer repeated questions about the *Meduza* journalist. On June 6, 2019, the presidential press secretary had already promised to take personal control of the case. Some news reports appeared in the media, referring to a certain order instructing an end to the Golunov case before the live broadcast nationwide phone-in to reduce the extent of social tension. Undoubtedly, such reports are unsubstantiated; however, the President himself, during the nationwide phone-in, commented on the Golunov case and characterized it as outrageous. That is, the president's position and the position of speaker of the Federation Council, who characterized the case as reckless, were similar; this allows one to assume the pre-agreed-on nature of the actions against the officers of MIA. The strategies of support for remedial actions on the part of governmental representatives were recorded beginning June 11, 2019, and were realized through the dismissal of generals and the establishment of a special internal unit.

### *Outcome*

Some significant consequences were observed only a week after Golunov's detention: Two generals in charge of the drug control units were dismissed; the minister of the interior, who personally announced the termination of Golunov's prosecution, gave instructions to set up a unit to oversee the activities of the officers of the Drug Control Department under the MIA; a public discussion was launched that doubted the existence of measures, to be provided by the state, aimed at protecting citizens from illegal prosecution; and the issue of the feasibility of severe punishment for consumption and possession of minor amounts of



drugs was raised during the discussion. The police officers who had detained the journalist were convicted in May 2021 and found guilty of abuse of office.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, using process tracing, we have examined three distinctive political scandals beyond the Western context. We have analyzed how different actors using personal or institutional influence tried to manage a scandal to mitigate negative consequences and achieve their own strategic goals. Based on our findings, we argue that differing media, political, and cultural contexts largely dictate the particularities of a scandal unfolding. Taking this discrepancy into account, the application of Toepfl's (2020) theory differentiating publics in illiberal democracies into three types both made it possible to justify the existence of scandalous events within the context that was initially considered irrelevant for constructing the scandal theory, and was efficient for splitting the media into groups representing different types of actors that influence development of the scandal.

Although each type of scandal was different, we found common factors that influenced their development. The factor of solidarity was highlighted amid the efficient causal mechanisms. In Slutsky's case, solidarity was shown by the deputies of the State Duma; in Arashukov's case, by senators; and in Golunov's case, by journalists. Undoubtedly, support or condemnation by a professional community plays a vital role in Russia. The collective team becomes the first judge to be relied on by the population in its assessments. The virtue of a scandalized person is assessed on the grounds of the response from his or her colleagues and their reaction to the scandal.

The factor of social significance of offense was used to draw attention to the scandal and shift the agenda toward the scandal so that the actor could present the offense in a broader context, focusing on a socially relevant problem. In Slutsky's case, it was a call to fight harassment; in Arashukov's case, it was a fight against corruption; in Golunov's case, it was a fight against police arbitrariness. The use of the symbol "I/We, Ivan Golunov" as a management tool proved to be very efficient for two reasons. First, the symbol facilitated the transfer of the event background from the private sphere to the public domain when the journalist's affront became an insult to his readers and colleagues who rallied to his defense. The realization that the threat of breach of legal norms by MIA representatives may become real for any citizen of the country probably encouraged the people to take offline action to draw attention to their vulnerability and express their outright disagreement with the existing situation. Second, the creation of a unifying symbol facilitated its viral spread online, allowing the campaign to gain mass appeal in the shortest time.

Moreover, scandal sensitivity is conditioned by a set of values and dominant beliefs. The political actors used the citizens' perception of the scandal in applying strategies; for instance, the subject of harassment was presented as insignificant. In the context of the corruption scandal, framing of personality attributed to the features of an ultrarich corrupt official can be used to create a general opinion that, in addition to the unjustified wealth, the politician is guilty of other crimes—for instance, a volatile economic environment. In a power scandal, it is possible to use a call to restore justice, infringed on by a person who illicitly uses political power.

Surprisingly, the key strategy to refute accusations in Russia is simple denial, which is recognized as inefficient (Brown, Xu, & Formentin, 2019) but allows some political actors to avoid serious consequences. All three key actors in the scandals, including the MIA in Golunov's case, denied the alleged offenses.

Finally, a number of potential limitations need to be considered. Future research should consider expanding the number of political scandals under investigation to prove the common strategies used by the actors to influence the scandal reported in this article. Further cross-cultural studies need to be performed to establish whether the factors discussed are valid only in post-Soviet countries or in other contexts. Moreover, examining the role of social media in the spread of scandals and studying the public's reactions will help to build a comprehensive picture of the development of this phenomenon.

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