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Politics and the Media in Postcommunist Russia

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The evidence of a nationally representative survey conducted in April 2001 suggests that television is the medium of choice for most Russians. At least 92 per cent watch at least several times a week, with state channels more popular than those in commercial ownership. The media enjoy a high level of trust, and there is widespread agreement that they should adopt a stabilising role in society rather than simply report developments. Television is the main source of information when Russians make their electoral choices; there are accordingly considerable implications in the extent to which pro-Kremlin candidates and parties enjoy the support of the state media, which in turn are the favourite viewing of the voters that support them.

Russians don't think much of the Gorbachev years. But they do value the *glasnost* that led to a broadening of press freedom and eventually, in 1990, the abolition of censorship itself. Censorship is still illegal, under the postcommunist constitution that was adopted in 1993. Freedom of the media, however, is more fragile, partly for economic reasons – circulations have been falling, advertising revenues are uncertain, and distribution charges have been rising. Media freedom has also become more vulnerable because of political pressure, this being most dramatically apparent over the Easter weekend of 2001 when armed guards seized the most important commercial television station, NTV (in January 2002 the last remaining commercial channel, TV6, lost its appeal and also faced closure). What do Russians themselves make of all this? How much do they think their media have changed over ten years of postcommunist rule? And are those changes, in any case, for the better?

Issues of this kind are central to the multi-level investigation of the politics of Russia's postcommunist media in which the authors are currently engaged. A national survey, fielded in April 2001, asked two thousand adults all over the country for their opinions. In addition, we conducted 24 focus groups in Moscow, Ulyanovsk and Voronezh, and gathered video evidence of political commercials and national news during the 1999 Duma and 2000 presidential elections. The authors, in addition, were in Russia during both of these elections as part of a monitoring exercise conducted by the European Institute of the Media, which provided an opportunity to interview editors, government media officials, party representatives and presidential hopefuls. In this article we offer some preliminary conclusions on patterns of media consumption and public attitudes, particularly towards television; within this context, we give particular attention to the role of the Russian media in the electoral process – a process in which, for some, their intervention had been decisive.¹

Patterns of media consumption

The media had a particularly important role for the Soviet leadership in the creation of a fully communist society. Newspaper circulations increased steadily and by the late Soviet period they were among the highest in the world. Radio, and then television, came later: about 5 per cent of the population could receive television by 1960, but by the late 1980s more than 90 per cent of all households had television sets and the typical audience for the main nightly news programme was about 80 per cent of the adult population, including the entire armed forces (Ezhegodnik, 1986, p. 94; Mickiewicz, 1988, p. 8). Broadcasting was entirely in the hands of the state, and two national channels were dominant: Ostankino on Channel 1, and Russian State Television on Channel 2. In addition, much of the country could see either the Moscow channel on Channel 3 or the St Petersburg television on Channel 4.

According to our survey evidence, television is still the medium of choice in contemporary Russia – as it is in most other developed societies. As many as 92 per cent of our respondents watched television at least several times a week, usually for two or three hours at a time (see Table 1); they watched even more on their days off. And only 2 per cent did not have their own sets. The two main state channels, Russian Public Television (ORT) on Channel 1 and Russian Radio and Television (RTR) on Channel 2, are the most widely watched, attracting a daily audience of 84 and 71 per cent respectively of all respondents. The main evening news on ORT is the most popular programme of its kind, as it was in Soviet times. The main commercial channel NTV is in third place with 53 per cent, disproportionately in urban areas (its reach in the countryside is still rather less than that of the major state channels). By contrast, newspaper circulations have fallen sharply; local papers, on the evidence of our survey, have retained a more loyal readership, but more than six times as many watch television as read a national daily.

Table 1: Russian media consumption, 2001 (rounded percentages)

	daily	frequently	occasionally	rarely	never	don't know
National newspapers	12	24	23	16	25	0
Local newspapers	17	40	19	10	13	0
National television	77	15	4	2	2	0
Local television	49	22	9	5	11	4

Source: authors' survey conducted by Russian Research, fieldwork 10–26 April 2001, n = 2000. 'Frequently' was defined as several times a week; 'occasionally' as several times a month; and 'rarely' as several times a year.

Patterns of perception

Even in the Soviet period, Russians were beginning to enjoy quiz shows and variety programmes. But media perceptions, we found, are rather different from those in Western democracies. Russians still enjoy Western game shows like 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire' and 'Wheel of Fortune'; they've just been introduced to 'The Weakest Link'. At the same time there is considerable support for the idea that television, as in the Soviet years, should support the state and its various objectives. Russians are often more distressed by the portrayal of violence and chaos on their television screens than by pro-government bias. Soviet television, focus group participants told us, had been 'more spiritual' and 'more cultured'. 'The only thing our country seems to need nowadays is sex, tampons, Snickers and things like that', as one of our Voronezh participants put it disgustingly. In the words of another, 'I'm interested in life, but not in this sort of thing'.

In spite of these criticisms, the media are more trusted than any other social institution in contemporary Russia – more than the armed forces, the Church, political parties or government itself. And state television is trusted more than any other section of the media. As many as 57 per cent of our survey respondents had full or substantial confidence in state television, compared with 53 per cent for radio, 47 per cent for the printed press, and only 38 per cent for private television. Similarly, far more respondents thought state television was the 'most unbiased and reliable source of information': 65 per cent took this view, compared with just 13 per cent for commercial television and 18 per cent for the national press. State television is also more popular than commercial channels, with 37 per cent putting ORT in first place and just 26 per cent preferring NTV.

One of our more unexpected findings was that Russians had a more positive view of their media under Putin than during *perestroika* or in the early postcommunist years. Even more strikingly, relatively few thought it was the job of the media in any case to provide a broad and objective diet of information. Many thought a free media would be 'dangerous', and that it was more important for the media to encourage the development of a stable and well ordered society. One reason for their confidence in Russian Public Television was that it was 'authoritative' and 'patriotic'. By contrast, NTV was thought to present a more balanced picture, but it was unduly influenced by its owner, the controversial financier Vladimir Gusinsky (in self-imposed exile by the time of our survey), and in addition it was too 'ironic' and 'disrespectful'. Indeed, 17 per cent of our 2001 survey respondents thought television had been better in the days of Soviet censorship than at any other time.

Many, in fact, thought it was simply irresponsible of the mass media to present information in a neutral way, without any kind of reference to wider moral or patriotic values. Before, as Vladimir from Moscow told us, television used to 'lead the people'. Now, in the words of another Moscow focus group participant, 'it only unites people in the sense that if they show the price of vodka is going up, everyone goes out and buys some more'. 'Earlier, things were too good to be true', explained a Moscow lecturer in her fifties. 'We lived in a fairy tale, and when we watched for example "Kuban Cossacks" we knew it wasn't really like that. But that didn't spoil it for us.' There was even open nostalgia for the showpiece public

displays of the Soviet period. 'When you saw the military parades on Red Square, didn't you feel a sense of pride in your Fatherland?', a 62-year-old pensioner asked his group in Moscow. 'There were even tears in my eyes', admitted another pensioner in response.

Patterns of influence

We took a particular interest in the coverage of elections to the Duma and the presidency in 1999 and 2000, which monitoring reports and our earlier research suggested had been heavily biased in favour of the Kremlin (Oates and Roselle, 2000; White, McAllister and Oates, 2002). The Duma campaign, in particular, marked a new low, with state television accusing the Kremlin's main challengers of being criminals, even accessories to murder, and accomplices of foreign powers, particularly Israel and the United States. Much was made of former prime minister Evgenii Primakov's advanced years (he celebrated his 70th birthday during the campaign), and of his hip operation (the focus of a gory on-screen simulation). At the same time Kremlin supporters, and those whose votes were likely to take support away from its opponents, were given disproportionate attention (editors themselves did not disguise the bias in their coverage, although they also pointed out that the flamboyant nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy was simply good television).

There was no doubt that as in previous elections, television was the main source of voter information. With a national press that scarcely circulates outside the major cities and a territory that is a seventh of the world's surface, it could hardly be otherwise. In the Duma election of December 1999, 43 per cent of all our respondents indicated that the national state channels had been their main source of information in choosing among the candidates and parties, and no more than about 2 per cent cited commercial television, local television or the national press. The position was even clearer in the presidential contest in March 2000. Nearly 57 per cent gave national state television as their main source of information, and once again only about 2 per cent mentioned commercial television, local television or the national press. Did it matter, in either case, that state television gave such a disproportionate share of its attention to the pro-Kremlin parties and candidates?

According to our survey evidence, it mattered quite a lot. We asked, for instance, how our respondents had voted in December 1999 and March 2000, and compared this with the source of evidence that our respondents said had been the most important in shaping their electoral decisions. We set out the results in Table 2. In the Duma election of December 1999, as we have seen, state television was the most important single source of voter information. But as Table 2 makes clear, state television was more important for supporters of the Kremlin-supported Unity party than for the supporters of all of its major competitors. There was a similar association in March 2000, although a less dramatic one. Once again, state television was a more important source of political information for Putin voters than for the supporters of other candidates; indeed, it was a more important source of information than all the others put together. Clearly, there are complex flows of causation at work within these figures; but they establish at least a strong *prima facie* case that there were strong reinforcement effects between state television

Table 2: Viewing and Voting, December 1999 and March 2000 (percentages)

<i>Duma election, December 1999</i>	
Unity voters	61
Communist voters	47
Fatherland-All Russia voters	39
Entire sample	43
<i>Presidential election, March 2000</i>	
Putin voters	63
Zyuganov voters	54
Yavlinsky voters	40
Entire sample	46

Source: As Table 1 (the percentages show those who reported national state television as the most important source of information when making their vote choice).

and pro-Kremlin parties and candidates of a kind that seriously disadvantaged their competitors.

We tested this conclusion further in a regression analysis in which we isolated television viewing from the other factors that contribute to voter choices. There were significant socio-economic differences between those who identified state-run ORT as their favourite channel and those who preferred NTV, and at least some of these were likely in themselves to influence voting patterns. ORT supporters, for instance, tended to be older and female; they were more likely to live in the country, they had lower levels of education, and lower incomes. But as our regression analysis in Table 3 makes clear, even when socio-economic factors of this kind are taken into account, a preference for the main state or commercial channel was still a significant factor in influencing electoral choices. A preference for ORT, as we can see, was an important predictor of support for Unity in the 1999 Duma election. More strikingly, a dislike of NTV was the *single most powerful predictor* of a vote for Putin in the presidential election that took place the following March.

The Duma and presidential elections of 1999 and 2000 were distinctive in the extent to which they made use of *kompromat* or 'black propaganda' in campaigning. On our evidence, it seemed to work. Many in our focus groups said they had been dismayed by the relatively novel sight of political mudslinging on Russian television. And yet our survey results suggest that many more had been influenced by a series of programmes that were designed to undermine the reputation of politicians and their parties, and which were clearly little influenced by the fact that the election law clearly prohibited such tactics. Some 14 per cent of our respondents, in fact, thought *kompromat* was 'a good way to know more about famous people',

Table 3: Predicting Vote Choices, 1999 and 2000

Independent variables	Unity vote 1999		Communist vote 1999		Putin vote 2000	
	betas	t-scores	betas	t-scores	Betas	t-scores
Older age	.005	0.2	.260	10.2**	-.068	-2.3**
Female	-.033	-1.4	-.050	-2.2**	.035	1.3
More educated	.114	4.3**	.037	1.5	.007	0.2
Work outside home	.024	0.9	-.088	-3.4**	.039	1.3
Higher income	.012	0.5	.017	0.7	-.013	-0.4
More urban	-.075	-2.6**	.004	0.1	-.016	-0.5
Muscovite	-.053	-2.0*	-.096	-3.7**	-.050	-1.7
Prefers ORT	.083	3.2**	.046	1.8	.027	0.9
Prefers NTV	-.008	-.308	.041	1.6	-.094	-3.2**
Adjusted r-squared	.027		.086		.018	

*Significant at the .05 level.

**Significant at the .01 level.

Source: As Table 1.

Note: T-scores are rounded. It should be noted that when 'ability to receive NTV' is included as an independent variable, it is a significant positive predictor of a vote for the Communist party in 1999.

and more than a third agreed 'there must be some truth in it or it would not be on television'; less than a third said they did not believe such reports, and were not influenced by them. On this evidence, political spin doctors – or as Russians call them, 'election technologists' – are likely to find employment for some time to come.

Overall, our evidence is certainly consistent with the view that postcommunist Russia has 'free' elections, with a choice of candidates and parties. But it is less clear that these are 'fair' elections, in which the regime confronts its opponents on a relatively even playing field. Television is a central variable in these decisions, as the single most important source of political information and the most important source of information when voters make their choices. A partisan television is accordingly a very powerful political weapon, and one the Kremlin has not hesitated to use to its advantage. The steps it has taken since Putin's election to assert its control over the channels that might have provided a genuine alternative suggest that the political significance of the media has not been lost upon the current administration. And it suggests that the political use of television in particular will exert an even greater influence in the next round of national elections than it has done up to the present.

Note

- 1 We draw in this article upon the results of a national representative survey conducted for Sarah Oates, Stephen White and John Dunn of the University of Glasgow by Russian Research of London and Moscow under ESRC grant R000223133 from the UK Economic and Social Research Council, whose support is gratefully acknowledged.

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