

9

Where's the party?

Television and election campaigns in Russia

Sarah Oates

Although political parties were created long before anyone had dreamed of television, it is now difficult to imagine how parties would function without this broadcast medium. Television brings citizens the words and images of their leaders on a daily basis, giving them at least the illusion of contact with their politicians and government. During election campaigns, television typically provides the most important source of information for voters. Yet in Russia, the development between parties and television has been reversed. As a strong and influential television system existed before political parties were founded in the young Russian state, parties have had to learn how to market themselves through television instead of the medium learning how to cover existing political parties. Evidence from 1993 to 2004, including how political parties choose to market themselves and how the evening news covers politicians, shows that the institution of television has come to dominate the institution of political parties.

This chapter will first consider how Russian political parties and presidential candidates market themselves on television, then analyse how major television channels have covered election campaigns and, finally, examine how voters responded to these marketing attempts. It would seem that Russian television has fuelled the creation of media-driven parties: 'broadcast parties' that have no real roots in the electorate, no tangible ideology beyond serving the needs of their political masters and, most ominously, no accountability to the public.

The role of television in politics and elections

Where does the study of Russian media and voting behaviour fit within the broader context of the voting behaviour literature? It is principally valuable for shedding light on existing theories about the nature of the relationship between media and voting, in particular because the Russian political system was formed along a Western model. In addition, Russia has held eight elections for parliament and the presidency between 1993 and 2004—contests that have failed to meet the democratic expectations of many analysts, scholars and some Russian politicians themselves. In this sense, Russia is the 'big bang' of media and politics: a chance to observe the critical intersection of media, parties and the electorate in a time of rapid change and in an environment relatively free from established democratic institutions. This is particularly useful as the literature on media and politics at times seems mired in arguments about ownership and effects, rather than about the broader questions of long-term or cultural relationships between media and political systems.

The classic model of the relationship between party and voters comes from the Michigan School of voting behaviour (Campbell *et al.* 1960). Building on the findings of

Berelson *et al.* (1954) that voting intention was relatively fixed and unaffected by media messages, scholars in the United States developed theories of long-term partisan identification. In Europe, Lipset and Rokkan's work (1967) suggested that party development and success paralleled societal cleavages, such as religion and class. In both of these theoretical approaches, media would play only a marginal role. This is not an uncontroversial point, as some scholars argue that the US voting studies in the 1950s and 1960s were carried out in a different, more stable era. In addition, party strength has eroded, while the power of the media through cable television, digital television and the Internet has grown exponentially. Still, it is clear that party and media formation were much more parallel than in the Russian case.

Where does this leave the study of the Russian media and voting behaviour? It would suggest that the well-rooted media system inherited from the Soviet Union could subsume or even overwhelm a nascent party structure. There is ample evidence to suggest that media matter a great deal in Russian elections, as voters have not had much opportunity to build up loyalties or fixed preferences to particular parties. Rather, public opinion surveys before both parliamentary and presidential elections from 1993 to 2003 have shown large shifts in public opinion and voting intention for parties and candidates within weeks and even days of the polling dates. At the same time, studies of nightly news coverage during Russian elections show a pattern of unfair political coverage, with a biased emphasis on progovernment parties and candidates, as well as some virulent mud-slinging campaigns against government opponents (European Institute for the Media 1996a and b, 2000a and b; Oates 2004; Oates and Roselle 2000). Although these tactics are obvious and are noted by Russian viewers, the question becomes why the media in Russia has managed to distort the political system to the extent that, arguably, Russian television is now the most powerful political institution in the country.¹

Public opinion data suggest that television remains a central influence in society in Russia. This is due in part to economics, as many consumers can no longer afford newspapers, and television is still distributed without a licensing fee. Personal computers are out of reach of most consumers, not to mention the dearth of broadband access. There are six major nation-wide channels (see Table 9.1). Seventy-seven per cent of the

Table 9.1 Russian television channels: ownership and audience share

<i>Name</i>	<i>Ownership</i>	<i>Daily viewership (%)</i>
1 First Channel ^a	51% owned by the state, rest by a mix of public and private corporations, effectively controlled by the Kremlin	83
2 Russian Television and Radio (RTR)	State-owned	71
3 TV-Centre	Funded primarily by City of Moscow administration	16
4 NTV ^b	Commercial; taken over by interests friendly to the Kremlin in 2001	53

5	Culture	State-owned cultural channel created by presidential decree in 1997; only channel that does not carry paid advertising	8
6	TV-6	Currently a commercial sports channel. Was briefly a platform for opposition journalists from NTV	N/A

Source (media use): a survey of 2000 adults conducted by Russian Research in April 2001.

Notes

a Previously known as *Obshchestvennoe Rossiskoye Televidenie* (Russian Public Television)—and before that as *Ostankino*.

b Often referred to as *Nezavisimayoe Televidenie* (Independent Television) but, according to station heads interviewed by the author in 1999, the initials do not actually stand for anything.

respondents in a 2001 survey reported watching television daily. Sixty-five per cent of the respondents felt that state television was the ‘most unbiased and reliable’ source of information. In fact, more of the respondents (57 per cent) had ‘full’ or ‘considerable’ confidence in state television than they had in the armed forces (50 per cent), the government (30 per cent) or the parliament (16 per cent). Conversely, only 11 per cent of the respondents claimed they had ‘full’ or ‘considerable’ confidence in political parties, placing them on the bottom of the trustworthiness scale.

Neither trusted nor appreciated, Russian political parties have nonetheless proliferated, but generally failed to consolidate power since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The electoral system created by the 1993 Russian constitution encouraged political parties in two vital ways. First, 225 of the 450 seats in the lower house of the parliament (the Duma) were elected through a nationwide party-list system. Any party that earned more than 5 per cent of the national vote received a proportional amount of the party-list seats in the Duma. In addition, individuals who ran for the rest of the seats through 225 single-member districts across Russia could affiliate with a political party (as could those running for the 178 seats in the upper house of the parliament).² The first Duma elections were held in 1993, with early elections slated for 1995 and then regular elections planned for every four years. The role of political parties was left more nebulous for the presidential elections, also scheduled for every four years. The successful presidential candidates, Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin, have declared themselves ‘above parties’ and won without party affiliations.

In theory, the party system should have eliminated extremism with the 5 per cent barrier, encouraged party consolidation and served as an impetus for the creation of a relatively stable party system. The practical results have been far different, particularly after the surprising outcome of the first Duma elections in 1993 (for abbreviated results of the Duma elections 1993–2003, see Table 9.2). While the leaders of the pro-government and market-oriented Russia’s Choice party expected a strong showing, it was the nationalist, xenophobic Liberal Democratic Party of Russia that dominated in the party-list election. As the Liberal Democrats were just the sort of extremist party that was supposed to be eliminated by the 5 per cent barrier, it was a blow to the Yeltsin administration. Russia’s Choice did much better in the single-member constituencies, however, leaving the first Duma with a bare plurality held by pro-government forces. Despite being banned for a time and garnering little media attention, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (the acknowledged successors to the Communist Party of

the Soviet Union) also had a respectable showing, with 12 per cent of the party-list vote in 1993. A total of eight parties won seats in the 1993 party-list race, while other parties were represented by candidates who were successful in single-member district races.

Over the next three Duma contests from 1995 to 2003, the ability of parties to pass the 5 per cent barrier weakened, with only four parties successful in 1995, six in 1999 and four in 2003. There are only two parties that have been successful in the party-list race in all of the Duma elections—the Liberal Democrats and the Communists ('Communist' here refers specifically to the Communist Party of the Russian Federation). Yabloko, a relatively liberal party, won party-list seats in 1993, 1995 and 1999. In all four elections, the other successful party-list contenders were those sponsored—or at least supported—by pro-government forces: Our Home is Russia in 1995; Unity, the Union of Right Forces and Fatherland-All Russia in 1999; and United Russia and *Rodina* (Motherland) in 2003. An average of 26 parties has run in the party-list race in the Duma in each election. While a handful of these parties have been able to propel their leaders into the national limelight and a Duma seat, only those listed above have been able to win party-list seats. Thus, there has been immense labiality on the one hand, with the large number of parties on the ballots, but stability on the other as the same handful of parties and pro-government forces return, under different names, to the Duma on the party-list ballot each election.

Within this pattern are some important trends in Russian political party marketing. The pro-government parties have learned to be both less pro-market and less pro-Western, a lesson they would have learned from

Table 9.2 Russian Duma party-list election results, 1993–2003: parties that crossed the 5 per cent barrier

<i>Year</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Political orientation</i> ^a	<i>% of vote</i>
1993	Liberal Democratic Party of Russia	Nationalist	23.0
	Russia's Choice	Broadcast/pro-government	15.5
	Communist Party of the Russian Federation	Communist	12.4
	Women of Russia	Special interest	8.1
	Agrarian Party	Special interest	8.0
	Yabloko	Liberal	7.9
	Party of Russian Unity and Accord	Pro-government/liberal	6.8
	Democratic Party of Russia	Liberal	5.5
1995	Communist Party of the Russian Federation	Communist	22.3
	Liberal Democratic Party of Russia	Nationalist	11.2
	Our Home is Russia	Broadcast/pro-government	10.1

	Yabloko	Liberal	6.9
1999	Communist Party of the Russian Federation	Communist	24.3
	Unity	Broadcast/pro-government/ Kremlin	23.3
	Fatherland-All Russia	Broadcast/pro-government/ Moscow+regions	13.3
	Union of Right Forces	Broadcast/pro-government/ liberal	8.5
	Liberal Democratic Party of Russia	Nationalist	6.0
	Yabloko	Liberal	5.9
2003	United Russia	Broadcast/pro-government	37.6
	Communist Party of the Russian Federation	Communist	12.6
	Liberal Democratic Party of Russia	Nationalist	11.5
	Motherland	Broadcast/nationalist/ pro-government	9.0

Source: Russian Central Electoral Commission bulletins.

Note

a The orientation is the author's own, based on party documents, media coverage, statements by party leaders, and free-time and paid advertising.

watching the populist campaigning of nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and his Liberal Democrats. Zhirinovskiy carefully targets his messages at various segments of the population and articulates clear, if sometimes extreme and unworkable, policy suggestions. In addition, he is careful not to associate himself with Western ideas, choosing instead to make xenophobic statements and play on feelings of Russian nationalism. It was clear by the 1995 Duma campaign that parties were turning more to images of Russian/Soviet patriotism than Western ideals. In this sense, parties were aping the ideas of the Liberal Democrats (who saw their party-list vote roughly halved from 1993 to 1995). In addition, a study of the party platforms shows that Russian political parties overall became less pro-Western, more nationalistic and much less in favour of a market economy from 1993 to 1995 (Oates 1998). No other party leader could match Zhirinovskiy for outrageous antics or posturing, but other parties did capitalize on his ability to better target the ideological preferences of the Russian voter. By the 1999 Duma elections, the pro-government party Unity was relying on images of the Russian military in Chechnya, law enforcement and even a famous Greco-Roman wrestler throwing opponents to the mat in its free-time and paid advertising. The Communists have led quieter campaigns, particularly in that they do not buy television advertising and have a hard time getting unbiased news coverage.

The 2003 Duma election saw a consolidation of some trends in Russian elections and party building, as traditional parties lost votes and the newer, media-based parties generally gained votes. Two former rivals who started party life as 'broadcast' parties—Unity and Fatherland-All Russia—joined forces in 2003 to create the formidable United Russia party. This party, which enjoyed enormous state resources, the overt blessing of

the president and extensive media favouritism, achieved the greatest ever success in a Duma election, garnering almost 38 per cent of the party-list vote. Meanwhile, the fortunes of the Communists, ignored or vilified in the media, dropped to about 13 per cent of the vote. A review of media coverage—as well as of political party platforms, advertising, free-time statements and other material—shows that various parties deliberately pursued the traditional Communist supporter with a double-edged strategy, claiming the Communists had sold out to business interests and that their own party better met the social needs of workers, veterans, retirees, rural people or other groups traditionally considered Communist supporters. This strategy appeared particularly important for the new party, Motherland, which enjoyed some government support and favourable media coverage. The Liberal Democrats also bounced back to a degree, winning almost 12 per cent of the vote.

One of the most worrying trends in Russian party development from 1993 to 2003 has been the tendency to rely increasingly on style over substance. All parties use a certain amount of marketing to 'sell' their ideas to the voters. However, over the course of a decade in Russia, it was sometimes very difficult to tell what, if anything, that really resembled a political party was behind the campaign façade. This led a television analyst to dub some parties no more than 'broadcast parties' (*yefirnie partii*) during the 1999 Duma campaign.³ It is an evocative term, suggesting that parties are little more than a selection of images and sound bites in the nightly news and their advertising. Another particularly worrying trend is the consolidation of the mass media, particularly powerful national channels, in the hands of pro-Kremlin forces. The regime has used dubious financial tactics to oust outspoken news producers, notably to wrest control of commercial television stations from those unsupportive of the Putin administration both in 2001 and in 2003. Those legal manoeuvres are underlined by the widespread violence against journalists, many of whom have been killed trying to report on stories ranging from corruption to the war in Chechnya.

Only a handful of parties have had sufficient means to virtually create themselves over the airwaves. It has been particularly important for parties to be able to influence news coverage and other programming content on at least one national television channel, preferably the state-run *Pervyi kanal* (First Channel). The party has to be well funded, not only to buy a large amount of airtime, but also to pay bribes for coverage when necessary (although political influence is generally more useful). It is important for the party to be fresh and new, without an unpopular track record. In addition, the party has to be able to call on a large network of resources, most commonly the current government administration. Finally, as the Yeltsin government learned in 1993, it is not enough to press for reforms from the top down. In order to succeed, the parties must appeal to a large segment of voters, which means aiming a message somewhere in the centre of the political spectrum. The success of the Communists and the nationalist Liberal Democrats in 1993 showed pro-government forces that this centre lay farther to the left economically and to the right in nationalist terms than their own party ideology in 1993.

As this set of requirements for a potential 'broadcast' party suggests, very few groups aside from the central government are able to mobilize such resources. In addition, it became much harder after the 1995 elections to find a powerful media source outwith the control of the presidential administration. Nonetheless, a select group of elite power bases have created successful broadcast parties. The Kremlin produced Our Home is Russia in

1995 and Unity in 1999. A regional coalition, with powerful Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov at its centre, created Fatherland-All Russia in 1999, using the Moscow government television channel TV-Centre as its mouthpiece. In 2003, the Kremlin and Moscow forces of Putin and Luzhkov joined to create the formidable United Russia party.

But are these parties merely marketing efforts? There is evidence on both sides of the argument—that they function as little more than voteseeking vehicles and that they have some elements of traditional political parties. On the side of the ephemeral nature of these parties, the best evidence is their generally short life span. Our Home is Russia, Unity and Fatherland-All Russia were all gone by the next Duma election. They had few concrete policies and many of those who campaigned at the top of the party list did not take up their seats in the Duma. The creation and behaviour of party factions within the Duma bore little relation to the party's statements during the campaign. On the other hand, Our Home is Russia, Unity, Fatherland-All Russia and United Russia were not unknown entities to the voters. It was clear that these parties supported strong elites within the national or regional government: politicians who were very vocal about their desires for the direction of the country, albeit not particularly clear on individual policies. Although the names changed, the forces behind the parties did not. In addition, although Unity and Fatherland-All Russia did not run again, a merged version of the parties did run very successfully in 2003 as United Russia.

Did the appearance of 'broadcast' parties halt or corrode the development of more traditional political parties in Russia? When results for the Russian Duma party-list contest are viewed through the lens of party type, the impact of the 'broadcast party' appears quite significant (see Figure 9.1). By the 1999 elections, it is clear that 'broadcast' parties were dominating. Other parties did succeed, notably the Communist Party, which has had

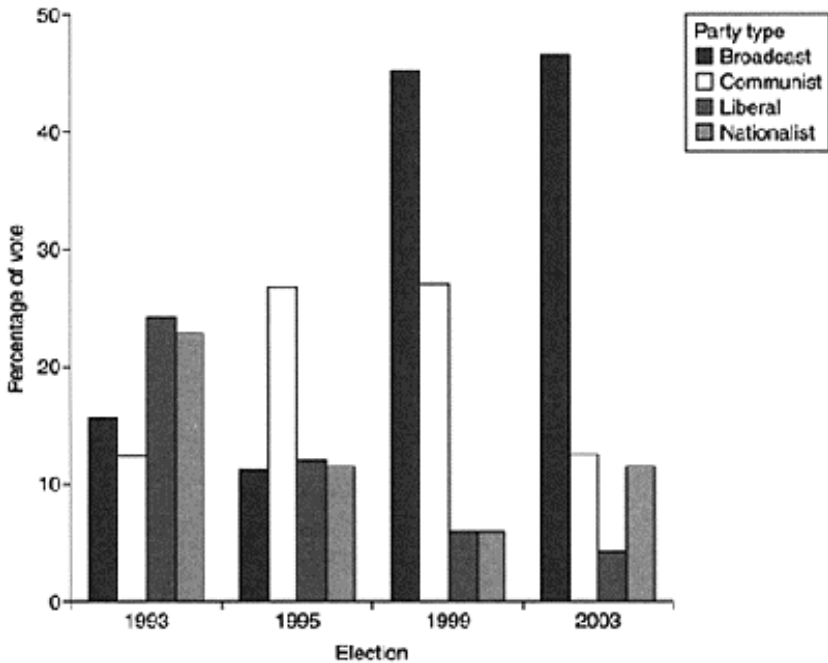


Figure 9.1 Percentage of votes in 1993–2003 Duma elections by party type (according to author's analysis). Broadcast parties: Russia's Choice (1993), Our home is Russia, Ivan Rybkin Bloc (1995), Unity, Fatherland-All Russia, Union of Right Forces (1999), United Russia, Motherland (2003). Communists: Communist Party of the Russian Federation Working Russia for the Soviet Union (1995 and 1999), Stalinist Bloc (1999). Liberals: Yabloko, Party of Russian Unity and Accord, Democratic Party of Russia (1995), Social Democrats (1995 and 1999). Nationalists: Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, for the Motherland (1995).

a coherent set of policies and a platform that was often cited and circulated during campaigns. Although the central ideology of the Communists slid further to the right from 1993 to 2003, it remained relatively coherent and predictable, both during elections and in the Duma itself. It did very well in the 1995 and 1999 elections, winning about one-quarter of the party-list vote, but dropped to about half that amount in other Duma elections.

The situation is complicated because, at times, the line between ideology and image is difficult to define in party politics in Russia. Although Figure 9.1 categorizes the Liberal Democrats as ‘nationalist’ and Yabloko as ‘liberal’, their party images are linked closely to those of their charismatic leaders rather than a particular ideology or policy direction. For example, although the Liberal Democrats project a strong ideological element that could best be described as pro-Russian, anti-state and anti-Western during campaigns, the party often supports the government in actual voting in parliament.

Television coverage of election campaigns in Russia

Presidential elections

Russian presidential elections are much more about personality than ideology, policies or party identification. Only one political party has played an important role in all of the elections: the Communists have provided the only remotely viable contender to challenge the incumbent president in 1996, 2000 and 2004. However, the election was far closer in 1996 than in later years, which in turn dictated a different media strategy on the part of the sitting president. However, the co-optation of the media into the Yeltsin campaign in 1996 created long-term problems for the role of the commercial media in Russian elections.

The Kremlin had learned enough about campaign strategy by 1996 to manage the re-election of Yeltsin, whose popularity had sunk into single digits by the start of that year. The victory was not won through television alone; rather, the Kremlin pursued a strategy of appeasing the populace, particularly by taking steps to end the first Chechen war, promising important economic reforms and negotiating with regional governments. Nor was a Communist president palatable to a majority of Russian voters. Yet television had a critical role to play on several fronts. First, it was used to inform the public, primarily via news and current events programs, of Yeltsin’s initiatives. The prime commercial station, NTV, modified its critical stance on the government to campaign for Yeltsin, a move channel executives have defended as necessary to stave off a possible victory for Gennady Zyuganov and a return to Communist rule. This support included hiding the information that Yeltsin suffered a heart attack during the campaign. During the campaign itself, Yeltsin’s team ran evocative advertisements under the slogan ‘I believe, I love, I hope’, in which citizens talked about their support for the president. Yeltsin’s image as the protector of the Russian nation during the collapse of communism was emphasized, in tandem with dire warnings of the consequences of a communist return.

The Communists have often announced that they eschew television and prefer ‘traditional’ methods of mobilizing support among Russians, such as mass meetings, party handouts and door-to-door canvassing. However, they did pursue a media strategy

in 1996, including making good use of free-time spots to discuss policy and the cultivation of their image as media outsiders. Yeltsin barely beat Zyuganov in the first round, but he did win handily in the second round (54 per cent to 40 per cent). Given Yeltsin's lack of popularity just a few months before the elections, it was an astonishing victory for the incumbent.

In contrast to Yeltsin, Putin has never needed such an extensive marketing strategy as he has maintained a far higher popularity rating. In fact, Putin did not bother to use his free-time allotment in either 2000 or 2004. It would have been largely irrelevant as the nightly news on the state-run First Channel relentlessly framed Putin as a leader, almost to the sycophantic level of former Soviet party chiefs. By 2004, the most routine task undertaken by Putin was shown on television—as well as a reaction from Putin to virtually any news item of note. It is significant to note that neither Yeltsin nor Putin used the resources of a political party to win. However, given their dominance and control over both mass media and the state apparatus, a party organization would have been unnecessary and perhaps even burdensome.

Duma election campaigns

Coverage of the Duma elections on Russian television has become less free and fair since 1993, despite the introduction of NTV as a powerful commercial television station by the time of the 1995 elections. Although by 1995 Russian law promised fair coverage, pro-government parties and incumbents received unjustly large amounts of media attention. Those who are considered the most plausible opponents to the Kremlin have been virtually shut out of the news or, by 1999, become the victims of mud-slinging campaigns on state-run television. Both the Communists and Yabloko have been victims of either a surprising lack of coverage or mud-smearing campaigns (European Institute for the Media 1994, 1996 a and b, 2000 a and b; Oates 2004; Oates and Roselle 2000). The Liberal Democrats, however, have received far less critical coverage. Some Russian journalists attribute this to the ability of Zhirinovskiy to make good television, while others claim it is due to his cooperation with the government in parliament.

While some elements of the Russian electoral system could be viewed as attempts to equalize access—particularly in that all parties get free time on television and can buy advertising⁴—the framing of parties and candidates by the main news programmes is more important in the campaign. Viewership of free-time slots is low, according to Russian television producers, and most free-time political advertising is quite poorly produced. In addition, advertising time (which reached up to \$40,000 a minute on the First Channel at prime-time during the December 1999 elections) was far too expensive for most parties.⁵ Neither free-time nor paid political advertising carries the weight and authority of news reports, particularly on the First Channel's flagship news programme *Vremya*.

A review of the studies by the European Institute for the Media and others from 1993 to 2004 shows a consistent trend toward unfair coverage and bias (European Institute for the Media 1994, 1996a and b, 2000a and b; Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights 2004a and b; Oates 2004; Oates and Roselle 2000). This bias is apparent not only on the prime state-run channels, but also on the commercial NTV channel. On the state channels, the pattern over the

course of four Duma elections has been clear: support progovernment parties, back the incumbent president and ignore or belittle any serious opposition to the government/president. As a result, the prime state-sponsored 'parties of power' (Russia's Choice in 1993, Our Home is Russia in 1995, Unity in 1999 and United Russia in 2003) received an abnormally large amount of coverage on channels 1 and 2. For example, in 1993, pro-state parties received more than 16 *hours* of coverage, while the Communist Party garnered a mere 13 *minutes* on state television (European Institute for the Media 1994). It is clear, however, that Russian voters did not merely absorb these messages and support only the parties that conducted extensive television campaigns, either paid or through editorial coverage. Despite their dominance of television, pro-government parties received less than one-quarter of the party-list vote in 1993.

In 1995 there was an enormous increase in both the amount of paid advertising and the editorial coverage of the parties in the elections. As in the 1993 campaign, the major parties, particularly pro-government Our Home is Russia, dominated the election news. It is important to note that by 1995 NTV was a well-established commercial television broadcaster. While studies have shown that NTV was more balanced than the state-run First Channel in presenting election news in 1995 (European Institute for the Media 1996a, Oates and Roselle 2000), the commercial channel was focused much more on war coverage than on the election campaign. When there was coverage of the 1995 Duma elections on NTV, it was often filtered through issues surrounding the war (such as whether Chechen citizens wanted to vote, rumours of terrorism for election day and possible violence at the polling stations).

The 1996 presidential elections were one of the clearest examples of how much the nascent Russian media system differed from libertarian systems in the West. As discussed above, NTV was voluntarily co-opted by the Yeltsin administration, with a top executive from the commercial station even joining the campaign team. While NTV had been critical of the government, particularly over the Chechen war, station officials did not want Communist leader Zyuganov to win the presidency. Thus, all major television stations colluded to market Yeltsin as a vigorous, capable president and failed to present Zyuganov as a feasible leader. Viewers were exposed to information about Zyuganov, particularly on NTV, but this was overwhelmed by the positive spin that Yeltsin was receiving.

The same patterns were clear in the 1999 parliamentary elections and the 2000 presidential elections, although there was a rise in mudslinging and 'black' propaganda aimed at Kremlin opponents. In particular, Mayor Luzhkov and other leaders of the new Fatherland-All Russia party suffered from both negative news coverage and outrageous reporting of *kompromat* ('compromising material'). This meant that news shows, particularly on the First Channel, often reported rumours and innuendoes as facts in order to damage the reputation of Luzhkov and others. This included broadcasting information to suggest that Luzhkov embezzled money or that his 70-year-old running mate was too old and infirm to serve. By the 2000 presidential elections, NTV was trying to keep a distance from the government, but there were no viable opponents to Putin. However, the First Channel took no chances and used news programmes before the election as an 'infomercial' for Putin, providing excessive coverage of every detail of Putin's political engagements. The channel also broadcast negative coverage of presidential candidate Grigory Yavlinsky, with dubious stories about alleged Western funding of his Yabloko

party and his possible cosmetic surgery. NTV was more balanced than the First Channel in its coverage in 2000, although some focus-group participants complained that it appeared that Yavlinsky was 'their' candidate.⁶

The 2003 Duma elections saw further distortion of election news coverage. The coverage was predictably pro-Kremlin, although it was clear that Mayor Luzhkov had moved from enemy to ally in this election. The First Channel provided particularly extensive coverage of Putin—from his most mundane state visit to his response to a terrorist attack on a Russian train that left 40 people dead during the last week of the parliamentary campaign, while Luzhkov joined a favoured cast of characters, who were consistently framed in a positive and non-questioning manner. However, the channel was clearly more anti-Communist than in previous elections. While before it had mostly ignored the Communists, during the 2003 campaign it featured several stories that were blatant *kompromat*, such as extended coverage of a tiny rally in Moscow allowing participants to make strange accusations against the Communists. Most other parties and candidates were ignored.

It was clear that by the 2003 elections NTV had lost its critical edge. Its news coverage, while not as sycophantic as that of the First Channel, was careful not to criticize the president or even bring up sensitive issue.⁷ However, it did retain its somewhat more ironic tone and broader interests. Thus, although reports on his fate were guarded, the jailed oil oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky was mentioned nine times on NTV's prime-time news during the election campaign (but just once on the First Channel's *Vremya*).⁸ True to the NTV style, the station's main news typically carried a few ironic or unusual news stories, including one on a restaurant which had sculpted the heads of the oligarchs in chocolate: despite the grave issues of personal freedom and the possible economic impact of the oil oligarch's arrest, the chocolate-head report was Khodorkovsky's largest amount of exposure on the main nightly news during the month-long campaign.

Voter response to political marketing strategies in Russia

The evidence presented above suggests that Russian voters have received increasingly less useful information about political parties and candidates in each election. Initially, the liberal laws on party and candidate access to television seemed to allow for a large amount of information to be distributed to the electorate. However, it quickly became clear that money and influence (enormously difficult to separate in Russia) were critical factors in how well parties and candidates could get their ideas across to the public. Few parties and politicians have been able to parlay the free time on national television into a lasting political organization. There are exceptions to this, notably Zhirinovsky's campaigning abilities that touched a chord of Russian nationalism not recognized by other parties at the time. However, in most cases, the relatively large amount of free-time and virtually unlimited access to paid advertising did little more than create a platform on which the parties could fail. Few parties had the resources for political marketing tools such as public opinion surveys, professional filmmakers, image-makers or consultants. As a result, the handful of parties that were able to fund more professional free-time spots and buy advertising had a disproportionate amount of impact on the viewers.

Recent studies have suggested that Russian viewers have a somewhat schizophrenic attitude toward Russian television. In the 2000 focus groups, it was clear that viewers were aware of deep bias on television news. Yet they retained a very high level of trust, particularly in state-run television. Many claimed that expectations of objectivity or even balance would be naive, but at least they understood the particular biases of the state-run media (particularly the First Channel). In fact, some even openly pined for the days of Soviet censorship, in part because the rules were very clear, but primarily because of the way that they remembered television as providing a hopeful, optimistic portrayal of their society. There was much suspicion of commercial television, particularly as the focus groups surmised that the station owners had their own particular agendas, and they found agendas connected to big business even more suspicious than those linked to government control.

How did these attitudes resonate into response to election coverage? The participants in the focus groups, which were held immediately before and after the 2000 presidential elections, were asked to discuss both the recent Duma contest and the presidential elections. Many of the respondents, particularly the older ones, claimed the smear tactics in the Duma campaign disgusted them. However, at the same time, they seemed to follow the mud slinging with great interest and, often despite initial protestations, admitted that some allegations had led them to change their vote. In terms of the presidential elections, the respondents were more resigned to and more approving of the greater decorum of the 2000 presidential contest. They pointed out that there was far too much coverage of Putin and occasionally remarked that they were getting little concrete information on policy plans or even the real personality of the man—but at least the coverage was decorous. The pattern of being presented with a pre-selected leader, being shown the leader engaged in a variety of unexciting activities and then being urged to vote for the leader was at least a familiar one to the respondents who were old enough to have voted in the Soviet era.

The findings of the focus groups suggest that the Western paradigms of the relationship between the media and the voters may have missed an important element of the model. It appeared that viewers in Russia were willing to give up an element of information flow for some degree of authority and order dictated by television, notably by the prime, statecontrolled First Channel. This curious duality between knowledge of bias, yet trust in state television, was present throughout the population, according to a survey of 2,000 Russians in 2001. While about 43 per cent of respondents reported either 'complete' or 'almost complete' confidence in the objectivity of news programmes, almost as many (42 per cent) had 'not much confidence' and 8 per cent had very little confidence. Although the First Channel's more obvious bias does not go unnoticed among Russians, it still commands a higher level of trust than other media outlets: one-third of the survey respondents selected it as the 'most trustworthy channel in its news coverage', while one-quarter chose NTV. The division between trust in state and commercial television was even more stark in response to a more abstract question: 65 per cent of the respondents felt that national state television was the 'most unbiased and reliable source of information', while just 13 per cent picked commercial television for the same role.

Since its takeover by pro-government interests in 2001, NTV has lost a degree of openness and combativeness with the Kremlin. It is clear that some subjects are

forbidden, especially the sort of open mocking of the president that was present in such satirical shows as *Kukli* (Puppets) in the 2000 campaign. By the summer of 2004, NTV had dropped its most controversial political debate shows and appeared even more ready to toe the governmental line. This is quite a difference for a channel that openly challenged the presidential administration with its coverage of first Chechen war. Yet the new, tamer face of NTV may matter little, as the commercial channel never rivalled the First Channel in its influence on elections. Survey respondents in both 2001 and 2003–04 overwhelmingly nominated state television (43 and 40 per cent respectively) as an ‘important’ source of information for making a vote choice in Duma elections.⁹ Only a handful of respondents claimed national commercial television was important to their vote choice. The same pattern held for the 2000 presidential election.

How do attitudes about media relate to the development of a political system in Russia? This chapter posits that the acceptance of authority over truth in mass media has led to a particular phenomenon in Russia, namely the growing success of the ‘broadcast party’ or even the ‘broadcast candidate’. Political image plays a part in elections in other countries, notably in the US presidential elections, but this is in addition to developed party systems. In Russia, the media have shown an unusually strong ability to not only *promote* parties, but *create* them as well. The dilemma lies in the growing electoral strength of these broadcast parties. If one defines broadcast parties as organizations that are without well-defined ideologies, platforms or even quantifiable policy statements, lacking grass-roots organization, funded by a government entity, and with no history prior to the elections or accountability after the elections, then each subsequent election in Russia has improved their fortunes. It is fair to note that in the 1993 elections virtually all of the parties except the Communists were essentially new and, in a sense, ‘created’ by mass media since they were heavily reliant on television to put across their ideas and images. Yet, instead of parties developing as well-rooted political institutions, the reliance on mass media to spread political messages seems to have become strengthened at the cost of real party organization.

In Western political systems, mass media are considered the servants of political parties. Politicians and political scientists alike often complain that the media, especially television, distort their messages or, perhaps even worse, ignore them. Nonetheless, political parties still function as a key link between voters and the governmental institutions of power. In Russia, it would appear that the broadcast media have hijacked the role of parties to mobilize the electorate. Unfortunately, the media have no particular responsibility in making sure that the politicians fulfil election promises or even live up to a particular image. When the central media are in turn controlled by the central government, there is little hope for expansion of political freedom and expression of divergent viewpoints.

Notes

- 1 This evidence comes from 24 focus groups commissioned by the author and carried out in Moscow, Ulyanovsk and Voronezh by Russian Research Ltd in 2000. The focus groups and a survey from April 2001 cited in this chapter were funded by the British Economic and Social Research Council.

- 2 The Council of the Federation has never been re-elected; representatives are now appointed. In addition, the Duma election law is now amended and all seats will be assigned through the party-list system.
- 3 Author's interview with Yelena Rukovtseva, Moscow, December 1999.
- 4 Free-time became much more limited in the 1999 campaign, when the Russian Central Electoral Commission announced that parties that received less than 2 per cent of the vote would have to repay the state for their television time.
- 5 From the author's interviews with television station directors and advertising executives, December 1999.
- 6 From the focus groups cited above.
- 7 Based on the author's analysis of the prime time NTV news show *Sevodnya* during the 2003 campaign.
- 8 Author's research.
- 9 The survey was carried out in December 2003 and January 2004 by Russian Research Ltd under the direction of Professor Stephen White (University of Glasgow). The research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

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