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Broadcasting agitainment: a new media strategy of Putin's third presidency

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This article argues that accounts of the Russian media system that tend to view the time from Vladimir Putin's rise to power in 2000 as a single homogenous period do not capture major qualitative shifts in state-controlled media strategies and in the nature of ideological messages disseminated by the media. By analyzing the output of Russia's two main television channels, *Pervyi Kanal* and *Rossiya-1*, during Putin's third presidential term we identify a range of distinctly new features that amount to a new media strategy. In particular, the amount of coverage of political issues has increased significantly through the replacement of infotainment with what we term *agitainment*—an ideologically inflected political coverage that, through adapting specific global media formats to local needs, is packaged in a way that is able to appeal to less engaged and even sceptical viewers. Our findings challenge existing literature on neo-authoritarian media systems. They show that when struggling for control over the public agenda, neo-authoritarian regimes start employing extensive and intensive ideological messaging, rather than preferring a largely de-politicized content. In the Russian context, despite the tightening of political control over the media, particularly following the annexation of Crimea, the new strategy paradoxically has strengthened the constitutive role played by the state-controlled broadcasters in the articulation of official discourse.

Keywords: Russian media system; Putin's third presidential term; agitainment; neo-authoritarian regime

There exists a scholarly consensus that a state-controlled media sphere is crucial for neo-authoritarian regimes if they are to maintain domestic legitimacy (Brady 2010; Petrov, Lipman, and Hale 2014; Walker and Orttung 2014). With the help of the mass media such regimes can effectively manipulate citizens' ability to make informed political choices, thereby allowing political elites to "reap the fruits of electoral legitimacy without running the risks of democratic uncertainty" (Schedler 2002, 36). In neo-authoritarian countries the political leadership will strive to maintain a situation that allows it to control the setting of the public agenda and the articulation of official discourse, while permitting a degree of media diversity in terms of ownership and the political leanings of individual outlets. The specificity

of a media system in operation under a particular neo-authoritarian regime depends on historical legacy as well as the current political configuration (Meng and Rentanen 2015).

In relation to Russia, a number of scholars have attempted to define the current Russian media system, either by foregrounding the impact of the Soviet legacy, or pointing to common features in media dynamics across a range of neo-authoritarian societies (Becker 2004, 2014; Oates 2007; Vartanova 2012; Koleva 2015). This article argues that available descriptions of the Russian media system, which tend to view the period dating from Vladimir Putin's rise to power in 2000 as a single homogenous span, neither capture nor explain major qualitative shifts in state-controlled media strategies and in the nature of the ideological messages disseminated by the media. This article focuses on a shift that has occurred in the course of Putin's third presidential term, during which, we argue, a new media strategy has been introduced. We propose calling this new strategy *agitainment*, to reflect the drastic increase in ideological and political messaging displayed in the state-controlled media output, alongside its systematic employment of specific global media formats to enhance its impact on viewers. Agitainment, we suggest, strengthens the constitutive role played by the state-controlled broadcasters in the articulation of official discourse.

In order to analyze this change, we will focus on the output of the two main television channels, *Pervyi Kanal* (Channel 1) and *Rossiya-1* (Russia-1). Rossiya is the fully state-owned channel, but it also airs commercials and so its programming is in part commercially driven. Technically only partly owned by the state, Channel 1 follows the Kremlin line particularly closely. Overall, the editorial considerations of both channels are similar. In neo-authoritarian societies, even those with a growing usage of an only partially censored Internet, as is the case in Russia, television still remains the main media tool of the regime (Walker and Orttung 2014). And even though Russian viewers' engagement with television is far from straightforward (Mickiewicz 2008; Toepfl 2013), the dominant role of television as the main news provider has so far been maintained. According to polls conducted by the Levada Center, between 2009 and 2016, even though viewers' trust in television fell from 79% to 56%, the medium nevertheless remained the primary source of news for 85–88% of people (Goncharov 2015; Konobeevskaya 2016). State-controlled television (and particularly the two main channels) plays a key role in articulating official discourse.

We define this discourse as a set of widely circulating communications, disseminated by leading politicians and state-aligned media, with a strong performative power of constructing, rather than reflecting, reality (van Dijk 1996). While television continues to occupy a central role in Russia's mass media system, any significant shifts in broadcasting patterns inevitably tell us a great deal about both the role assigned to the media by the regime and the ways it strives to use them for legitimation purposes. Such shifts also highlight changes in what the regime sees as its main political challenges.

The article's findings regarding the changing content of Channel 1 and Rossiya's broadcasts from 2012 onwards are based on a systematic following of the output of these two channels from 1 September 2010 until the summer of 2014 within the framework of a major research

project on the representation of ethnicity, nation, and race on Russian television.[1] For the subsequent period, the authors relied on the two channels' comprehensive web-archives, as well as other available online recordings of the broadcasts. After considering existing scholarly interpretations of Russian media models, we analyze the specificity of the new strategy of agitainment by looking at the formats and narrative structures of, and the actors within, a series of well-orchestrated campaigns around four ideologically charged themes, mounted by the state-aligned broadcasters in 2012–2016.

Russia's media system and the Kremlin's changing strategies

The fact that during the early years of Putin's first presidential term his government actively began to assert control over the media sphere, and television in particular, unsurprisingly encouraged scholars to shift their focus to a growing obstruction of media freedom and the public reaction to this trend (Zassoursky 2004; De Smaele 2004; Oates 2006, 2007; Mickiewicz 2008; Gehlbach 2010; Burrett 2011; Simons 2015). As a result, a focus on the breadth and methods of governmental control and on how the government has been collaborating with loyal oligarchs to manage the media through just three media holdings frames scholars' attempts to conceptualize the specificity of Russia's media system under Putin and its similarities to and differences from the Soviet media (Vartanova 2012; Kachkaeva and Fossato, 2016). Far fewer works actually systematically analyze fluctuations in the content of the media output (Hutchings and Tolz 2015; Lankina 2016; Lankina and Watanabe 2017).

A bold attempt to outline the broad parameters of the media system in Putin's Russia is Oates' "neo-Soviet model of the media" (Oates 2007). In Oates' view, the Soviet legacy plays a greater role than contemporary political realities and global communication trends in making the Russian media what they are. Among the main aspects of the Soviet legacy, Oates notes the tendency to present as "news" what amounts to: "propaganda from the point of view of political patrons" (1288); renunciation of objective or balanced reporting; self-censorship; flaws in media laws; governmental control; and continuities in audience reception. The prefix "neo" aims to capture such new factors as the role of market forces and physical violence against journalists (1296). Oates' emphasis on the importance of the Soviet legacy constitutes a challenge to Hallin and Mancini's (2003, 12) argument about forces of commercialism and globalization leading to a "considerable convergence" of media systems.

Oates' model is open to criticism. Do the factors she attributes to the current media model have a similar meaning and impact as their Soviet equivalents? For example, is the renunciation of balanced reporting in order to promote a single "correct" ideological viewpoint, as in the Soviet period, the same phenomenon as the current claim by leading Russian journalists that there is no such thing as a single truth, but merely competing narratives (Pomerantsev 2015)? Interviews with Russian journalists suggest that they see the role of self-censorship in Russia today and during the Soviet period in different terms (Schimpfossl and Yablokov 2014). Does the fact that, in opinion surveys, many Russians express nostalgic feelings about the Brezhnev era, including its media system, necessarily

mean that there is a continuity with Soviet times in what current audiences expect from the media?

Rejecting the concept of the "neo-Soviet" media model, Becker (2004, 2014) proposes that the current Russian media system can be described as "neo-authoritarian," suggesting that the Soviet legacy is less of a factor in media spheres in Russia and other post-Soviet countries. Instead, these share a range of features with other non-democratic media systems in countries ranging from China to Venezuela. In particular, Becker emphasizes new forms of control, which are less draconian and pervasive than in the pre-*glasnost'* USSR, and which allow for a certain "window of pluralism" to emerge. According to this "neo-authoritarian" model, the assertion of control over media outputs increases only episodically, when an issue is critical to the political leadership, particularly the outcome of elections (Becker 2014, 196). Market forces facilitate the production of television programs with the lowest common denominator so that they can appeal to wider audiences. The absence of an all-encompassing ideology means that "message shaping in neo-authoritarian systems is neither as extensive nor as intensive as in post-totalitarian systems" such as in the post-Stalin Soviet Union, Becker concludes (196). Overall, in Becker's view, "[f]rom being highly politicized in Soviet times," the media have moved to "offering people … a staple diet of tabloid-type popular entertainment in line with a global media trend" (199). The view that the Russian media under Putin emphasize "entertainment rather than political mobilization" has been expressed by other scholars as well (Walker and Orttung 2014, 75; see also Laruelle 2014).

Becker's model captures well the developments on state-aligned television prior to 2012, at the time when the regime's popularity appeared to be relatively high. Television coverage was marked by staged pluralism. Official discourse, as disseminated by the main broadcasters, for example in defining Russia as a national community, was deliberately ambiguous, with the expectation that such an approach would broaden public appeal and preserve maximum room for political maneuvering (Laruelle 2009, Ch. 5; Shevel 2011; Hutchings and Tolz 2015). With the occasional exceptions of election campaigns and major international crises such as Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004 and Russia's war with Georgia in 2008, and of the coverage of Putin's and Medvedev's actions (Panfilov 2005; Fossato 2006; Goscilo 2013), television output was essentially de-politicized. Diverse infotainment and feel-good content, such as popular films, celebrity gossip, sport, and even shows run by fortune-tellers, dominated air time. News on the two main channels offered a picture of the regime's success and suggested the redundancy of political activism, assuming that the public was tired of the political upheavals of the preceding years (Oates 2007, 1296; Walker and Orttung 2014, 75).

But does this picture capture the trends in Russian state-controlled broadcasting following the 2011 protests and the 2012 presidential elections? The protests, unprecedented since the early 1990s, questioned the power of official discourse, as it became clear that various groups critical of the Kremlin's policies were becoming increasingly effective in articulating publicly disseminated narratives around topics of significant popular concern, such as corruption, migration, and inter-ethnic relations. While during most of the first decade of the new millennium, Russia's improved economic performance helped support an official narrative of growing prosperity, and thus only subtle ancillary promotion was required in the

face of evident economic growth, in the wake of the 2011 protests the Russian authorities were confronted with the fact that the experiences of many citizens had begun to diverge from the government's promise of stability and improved living standards (Auzan 2015). In this new situation, state-controlled television now not only had to favorably frame the events selected for coverage, but also to actively compete with the Kremlin's critics for control over the public agenda.

These new requirements resulted in a significant change of broadcasting strategy, the nature of the narratives promoted, and the content of coverage. Focus on the system of political control obscures our ability to appreciate qualitative changes in the content of broadcasting. It is true that the new approach to coverage since 2012 included a radicalization of previous tendencies, such as the dissemination of anti-Western narratives. Observers of the Russian scene noted the replacement of the earlier model of staged pluralism with a more univocal coverage, particularly during the Ukraine crisis in 2014 and 2015 (Hutchings and Tolz 2015, 2016; Pomerantsev 2015; Teper 2016; Lankina and Watanabe 2017). But to describe the new media strategy as simply "more stringent" and "ratcheted up" (Pomerantsev 2015, 41–42) is insufficient. As Lankina and Watanabe (2017) rightly note, even though the Kremlin's use of modern media technologies during the Ukrainian crisis became widely acknowledged, research on the regime's precise media manipulation tactics has remained scarce and unspecific. While Lankina and Watanabe's research concentrates solely on the semantic aspect of the Kremlin's new propagation toolkit, we propose a more general outlook. As we will see below, there emerged a range of distinctly new features in Russian television programming that in aggregate amount to a new media strategy.

New Russian mainstream broadcasting follows both long-established international trends toward a tabloidization of political coverage and the more recent tendency toward a mainstreaming of exclusionist identity discourse exemplified by the Brexit and US presidential election campaigns (Bek 2004, 372; Thussu 2007; Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram 2016; Jackson, Thorsen, and Ring 2016; Seaton 2016; Wells et al. 2016). However, while classic Western infotainment is characterized by a market-driven displacement of hard-core political subjects by entertainment content (Thussu 2007, 27–28), Russian agitainment presents an intensive and prolonged, centrally sanctioned communication of ideologized political messages, delivered in accordance with an entertainment logic.

A glance at similar regimes elsewhere reveals analogous media strategies employed by neo-authoritarian incumbents struggling for monopoly over the public agenda. In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez combated hostile private TV stations by empowering and politicizing state and state-aligned networks, where politics was not only constantly covered, but also turned into a live reality show (Hawkins 2003; Cannon 2009; Block 2015). In Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan embarked on a rampant anti-opposition campaign a whole decade after coming to power, only due to a split in his initially wide political-media coalition and the resulting erosion of his agenda hegemony during the 2013 mass protests and corruption scandals (Kaya and Akmur 2010; Yesil 2016). As in Russia, these moves were accompanied by the exertion of more conventional legal and extra-legal pressure on critical media and journalists. This pattern of behavior defies Becker's description.

Media campaigns and ideological messaging

Contrary to Becker's description of the Russian media system as producing a largely de-politicized output, from late 2011 we witness a drastic increase in ideological messaging on Channel 1 and Rossiya. The change originally took place in the context of the 2012 presidential elections, with television playing a leading role in promoting Putin's candidacy. It is during this period that the amount of time devoted to political issues and intense ideological messaging first began to increase. After Putin's election in March 2012, this trend continued. Since then, both channels have been running well-orchestrated media campaigns around specific highly politicized topics. These campaigns, in the course of which a set of clear and simple ideological messages is constantly reinforced, had not previously been a feature of Russian state-controlled broadcasting. This new type of campaign began to dominate program schedules, with relevant stories being covered not just in news bulletins, but also programs of other genres, such as talk shows, documentaries, and interviews featuring Putin and a range of approved politicians and commentators.

Between 2012 and 2016, four coordinated campaigns followed one another. The first focused on the Pussy Riot affair and it ran from March to September 2012. This was followed by a year-long anti-migration campaign that began in the fall of 2012. The annexation of Crimea and the so-called Ukraine crisis were the subject of the third intensive campaign from February to May 2014, and continued to dominate the media agenda until at least the end of the year. The fourth campaign covered Russia's intervention in the Syrian Civil War, from September 2015 to May 2016.

The four campaigns have different origins. Even though the decision to prosecute members of the punk band Pussy Riot was probably taken at the highest political level, it is media, particularly television, coverage that largely accounts for the public resonance of the affair. The anti-migration campaign appears to be virtually entirely media generated, with limited state-level input coming from Moscow's mayoral office. In the last two campaigns, the importance of the major international events around which the media campaigns centered did not derive from how these events were mediatized. The difference in the origins of the campaigns only underscores the similarity of approaches that broadcasters took when orchestrating and directing them.

Each campaign reinforced a set of political and ideological messages, through their constant repetition in programs of different genres. The messaging had the same purpose of appealing to and consolidating what during the 2012 elections was termed by Putin's electoral team "Putin's majority." This was purposed to be composed of people across the country who did not share the life experiences and values of the liberally inclined elites in Moscow and St. Petersburg. It was in the course of the Pussy Riot campaign that "Putin's majority" was proclaimed to exist in reality (*Vremya*, April 22, 2012).

Each campaign strove to achieve the goal of the virtual creation of a national community, with "Putin's majority" at its core, through the dissemination of a set of common values around which people were expected to unite and through a radical othering of various

"enemies." In the course of the Pussy Riot television campaign, the regime's new conservative values agenda was for the first time articulated as part of official discourse. Russia was depicted as the bastion of values associated with "traditional religions." The anti-migration campaign systematically represented the "Muslim migrant" as a threat to European Christian civilization, of which Russia was part. The annexation of Crimea whipped up patriotic feelings and support for the government, which was represented as bravely defending ethnic Russians (*russkie*) in Ukraine from persecution and as returning a territory that rightfully belonged to the Russian state. The last campaign claimed that Russian army actions in Syria demonstrated Russia's regaining its great-power status, which made it equal to the United States with regard to its world standing. Each campaign contained a set of clearly defined "Others," who, in addition to the West as Russia's historical adversary, included such disparate groups as sexual minorities, migrants from predominantly Muslim countries, Russia's own residents of the North Caucasus, "Ukrainian fascists," and Islamist terrorists. In the course of the campaigns, each theme systematically attracted oversaturated coverage.

Choosing the campaign targets

It appears that in their choice of specific themes for exploitation during the campaigns, broadcasters took into account widespread concerns and anxieties, as well as preferences and prejudices. In articulating narratives around these issues, the campaigns aimed at intercepting the opposition's initiative. The Pussy Riot campaign's representation of the key features of Russian identity depicted these as rooted in Orthodox Christianity within a context of opinion polls indicating that over 70% of Russian citizens defined themselves as Orthodox. In line with the popular perception of Orthodox Christianity as a cultural and ethnic, rather than religious, identity (Dubin 2012), the broadcasters represented *pravoslavie* as a central element of Russian culture and the Russian Orthodox Church as the foundation of Russian statehood (Channel 1's *V Kontekste* and Rossiya's *Provokatory-1*, both on April 24, 2012; Rossiya's *Poedinok*, September 27, 2012; Yablokov 2014). Thus during this campaign, the state-controlled broadcasters appealed to ethnonationalist sentiments more systematically than before, which some opposition groups had been exploiting effectively during the previous decade (Laruelle 2015b).

Similarly, over a decade prior to the start of the anti-migration campaign, opinion polls had already demonstrated a growing societal animosity towards migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus (Laruelle 2010; Teper and Course 2014). Migration has also been a topic particularly actively exploited by anti-regime opposition groups. The anti-migration campaign ran at the time of elections in Moscow for the mayor's office, during which the incumbent mayor Sergei Sobyanin was challenged by a charismatic opposition figure, Aleksei Naval'nyi. Opposition to migration from Central Asia and the Caucasus had been one of the issues championed by Naval'nyi (Golosov 2014, 240; Malakhov 2014, 1075). Continuing the exploitation of the ethnicization trend in articulating a vision of a national community, the annexation of Crimea was represented in terms of ethnic Russians' moral obligation to defend their brethren and a historically imminent reunification of the Russian ethnonational community, similar to the reunification of Germany in 1991 (Teper 2016; Pain

2018, 36–40). This approach correlated with the results of an officially commissioned opinion poll that indicated that in 2013 56% of Russians saw Crimea as "essentially Russian," considerably more than those who viewed Russia's North Caucasus republics in the same way (VTSIOM 2013).[2]

Significantly, the issues raised during the campaigns were usually of global, rather than Russia-specific, salience. They tended to reflect worldwide trends in identity politics and address "global risks" with reference to which, as Beck and Levy (2013) argue, many current governments attempt to justify their policies. These "global risks" relate to the role of world religions, migration, violations and defense of human rights, and terrorism. Russian broadcasters have skillfully "localized" these already globally prominent issues, linking them to specific Russian realities and the authentic concerns of the average Russian, concomitantly framing them in a way that favors the regime's propaganda goals.

With its championing of conservative values, the regime in many ways utilized the rhetoric of right-wing activists and groups in Europe and the United States, who oppose what they regard as destructive liberalizing trends that are perceived to be undermining established religious traditions, ethnocultural cohesion, and the family (Laruelle 2015a; Shakhovtsov 2018). Similarly, Russian television's anti-migration campaign reproduced many tropes that have been utilized in the European and North American media's coverage of "Muslim migrants," particularly by the tabloid press (Poole 2011; Elver 2012; Tolz and Harding 2015) The campaign surrounding the annexation of Crimea was primarily structured around the universally prominent themes of resistance to human rights violations and the prevention of a possible "ethnocide." The coverage of the developments in Syria similarly exploited the familiar theme of the war on terror, particularly the by-then globally trumpeted threat originating from ISIS, which was officially presented as the main reason for Russia's military intervention (*Vremya*, September 30, 2015).

Genres, formats, and narrative structures

The Russian state-controlled broadcasters have increased their utilization of global media trends not only in terms of their identification of societal risks, but also in terms of the use of media genres, formats, and narrative structures. During the television campaigns, specific developments and public occasions were regularly turned into what Dayan and Katz (1994) called media events. The broadcasters also drastically increased the number of talk shows during which issues pertaining to the campaigns were discussed at length. Reliance on conspiracy theories as a tool to explain current affairs, even though not new, also became more common.

Classic media events, as defined by Dayan and Katz, involve saturated media coverage of major historical occasions. The coverage is co-produced by broadcasters and the political establishment, with the aim of engaging mass audiences. During media events, regular broadcasting schedules are interrupted. The topic of the media event is covered not only in news bulletins, but other types of programs too, with a significant amount of live broadcasting. Media events are performative, in the sense that they actively create reality and

are expected to enact change. Classic media events, such as major political occasions, historical anniversaries, and sporting competitions, tend to be pre-planned and they are expected to have integrative power, although sometimes they deliberately or inadvertently also reveal conflicts within society (Hepp and Couldry, 2010). Each of the four campaigns was punctuated by such pre-planned media events, and each media event included intense ideological and political messaging. The number of media events led by Russian television thus significantly increased compared with the earlier period.

In the course of the Pussy Riot campaign, a media event was constructed around public prayers across Russia on 22 April 2012 in defense of the Russian Orthodox Church against alleged violent physical and "spiritual" assaults on the Christian faith; the Pussy Riot performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour was claimed to be just one such example of this. The display of prayer in Moscow was heavily covered throughout the day and numerous news programs as well as talk shows were broadcast to discuss the occasion. It was during this media event that Channel 1 announced the consolidation of "Putin's majority" as a major political force in Russia, representing it as a historical turning point for the Russian state (*Vesti Nedeli*, April 22, 2012; *Vremya*, April 22, 2012; Rossiya's *Provokatory-1*, April 24, 2012).

During the anti-migration campaign there was a similarly pre-planned televised occasion in April 2013 around a surprise inspection of a train travelling to Moscow from Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, whence most Russia's labor migrants come. The staging was a result of a close collaboration between a politician from the federal government, the Moscow city authorities, and broadcasters, with journalists and politicians waiting for the train in the right place at the right time. The staged event dominated television coverage throughout the subsequent week and turned into a central point of the media campaign, which reinforced the message of the "Muslim migrant" as a major threat to Russian society (*Vesti* and *Vremya*, April 14–18, 2013; Rossiya's talk shows *Poedinok,* April 14, 2013 and *Spetsial'nyi Korrespondent*, April 24, 2013).

Unsurprisingly, during the campaign around the annexation of Crimea, the referendum on 16 March 2014 was turned into a media event with live broadcasting throughout the week of celebrations in Moscow, Simferopol, as well as other places across Russia and Crimea. The coverage underscored that Crimea and its residents were an integral part of the Russian nation and that annexation was the realization of the will of the people (Teper 2016). During the Syrian campaign, a media event that was intended to end it was constructed around the recapturing of Palmyra by the Russia-backed Syrian army. The central point of the media event was the live coverage of a concert performed by the famous St. Petersburg Mariinsky Symphony Orchestra at Palmyra's Roman theatre, which ISIS had been using as an execution site. The message was of Russia as a victorious force for good in Syria and worldwide (Rossiya, *S Molitvoii o Palmire,* May 5, 2016).

In addition to including media events of the classic type into the television campaigns, the Russian broadcasters followed another recent global trend. As Katz and Liebes (2007) note, in the past two decades a shift has occurred with ceremonial media events, such as the

celebrations of the referendum results in Crimea or the Palmyra concert, giving way to saturated and live coverage of disruptive events, such as disasters, terror attacks, and wars. In line with this trend, disruptive events predominated in the four Russian television campaigns. In the coverage of the arrest of members of the Pussy Riot band, their performance was depicted as a major disruptive event, which was systematically compared to acts of gross physical violence, including mass murder (Channel 1's *V Kontekste*, March 15, 2012; Rossiya's *Poedinok*, March 15, 2012; *Vesti Nedeli*, March 18, 2012). During the anti-migration campaign, disruptive events attracting saturated coverage through programs of different genres included the Stockholm riots and the murder of a British soldier by Islamists in London in May 2013. A further disruptive event was a scandal around the wearing of hijabs by schoolgirls in Russia's Stavropol region in October 2012 (Tolz and Harding 2015).

By the end of February 2014, the Russian media was already very closely following the Ukrainian political crisis and the events unfolding in Crimea. However, it was the Federation Council's swift consent to Putin's sudden formal request to use the military in Ukraine on 1 March that was treated as a truly disruptive event. This triggered an even more intensive coverage of the crisis on all political programs, which were now fully preoccupied specifically with Crimea and marked by an open, official support for Russia's intervention in Ukraine and the re-unification with Crimea (*Voskresnoye Vremya*, *Vesti Nedeli*, *Voskresnyi Vecher*, March 2, 2014). The coverage of the Russian intervention in the Syrian Civil War fitted the new type of disruptive media event particularly closely. In fact, this was Russia's first live television war, and Russian broadcasters overtly modeled their approach on the US media coverage of the 1990 Desert Storm operation (Kellner 1992; Thussu 2003, 117–118). The close coverage of the war contained regular detailed commentaries and exciting footage of key air and missile strikes on an almost real-time basis (*Vremya* and *Vesti*, September 30, 2015; *Vremya* and *Vesti*, November 20, 2015; *Vesti Nedeli*, November 22, 2015).

While acknowledging that ceremonial media events and saturated and live coverage of disruptive incidents share some common features, Katz and Liebes (2007) emphasize that the key difference between the two genres is "in the element of pre-planning." They argue that, even though the coverage of disasters may help governments to justify their interventionist policies, overall they are less able to control the representation and impact of disruptive events than in the case of ceremonial media events. It is clear that the Russian authorities and broadcasters are aware of the potential problem. So the broadcasters attempt to satisfy the audiences' thirst for disruptive events by staging them. Hence, some of the disruptive events broadcast by Russian television channels are also of the pre-planned kind. Broadcasters take a particular episode, which on other occasions would have been ignored, and turn it into a major disruptive event. The Pussy Riot performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in February 2012 was not the first such performance in a church by the punk group. Yet because of the specific political circumstances of the time related to the controversial elections, the authorities decided to start criminal proceedings against the performers. In this context, it was broadcasters who turned an insignificant incident into what Simone Gigliotti has called a "limit event," "an event of such magnitude and profound violence that its effects

rupture… so-called civilising tendencies that underlie the constitution of political and moral community" (Gigliotti 2003).

Turning the coverage of issues surrounding migration of North Caucasians into neighboring (predominantly ethnically Russian-populated) areas into a disruptive event centered around the wearing of hijabs in the Stavropol region in 2012 is another example of pre-planning and staging, with fully controlled coverage. In fact, the leading figure in orchestrating the coverage of "the invasion of North Caucasians, with devastating consequences for the indigenous [Slavic] population" (*Vesti Nedeli*, December 9, 2012), Dmitrii Kiselev of the Rossiya channel, admitted as much, proudly acknowledging that he and his team "practically staged" (*prakticheski instsenirovali*) the Stavropol story.[3] The Syrian operation similarly began with a semi-staged disruptive event of Russian airstrikes, for which the channels were evidently ready and had been subtly preparing the audience during the preceding two weeks through daily news items. The coverage of Russia's intervention in Syria was highly controlled by the broadcasters, offering the Russian audience an entertaining, pride-generating, and essentially safe media experience. Disruptive events proper, of the kind analysed by Katz and Liebes (2007), shown to Russian television viewers tend to take place abroad, such as the 2013 Stockholm riots.

Even though disruptive media events helped liven up the coverage, further efforts were needed to retain viewership while increasing the amount of air time for ideological messaging and discussion of political issues. A solution was found in significantly increasing the number of talk shows aired. During the television campaigns the talk show became the main format for exploring the campaigns' key themes. This appears to have been a well-thought-through strategy. Baum (2002) calls the discussion of political issues on talk shows "soft news," arguing that these, rather than regular news bulletins, are more accessible to and impactful on those audiences who are normally "politically inattentive." As Baum demonstrates, while many people quickly discard factual details disseminated by television programs, they retain the "emotional tags" attached to conveyed pieces of information; in other words, they remember how they felt about what they heard and saw. "Soft news" television programs are particularly effective in the attaching of strong emotional tags to the messages they disseminate. Finally, programs that employ episodic, rather than thematic, frames are more able to grab people's attention and influence their judgement. Episodic frames focus on discrete events and actions of individuals, whereas thematic ones tend to acknowledge longer-term trends and to account for a broader context. As Iyengar (1991) first demonstrated, if issues are episodically, rather than thematically, framed, citizens are less likely to hold governments accountable for solving the problems. Soft news programs, such as talk shows, tend to employ almost exclusively episodic frames, in contrast to traditional news bulletins, which favor thematic framing.

In 2008, talk shows and other televised debates on political issues were described as a "dying format" on Russian television (Tsvetkova 2008). However, from 2012 onward they have experienced an extraordinary revival. The first wave of establishing new talk shows occurred at the time of the presidential elections, with the introduction of Channel 1's *V Kontekste* and Rossiya's *Voskresnyi Vecher*, which were particularly vocal during the Pussy Riot media

campaign. Additional episodes across a wide range of talk shows were broadcast to supplement their regular weekly schedules on the days of the arrest and sentencing of the punk group members. In April 2013, Channel 1 launched a new talk show, *Politika*, thus justifying the initiative: "Discussions of political issues are again becoming topical in Russia."[4] Overall, political talk shows began to occupy a larger share of afternoon airtime than before. The performance of participants became more theatrical, as debates between them often turned into shouting matches and scandals, which moderators, however, could skillfully turn on and off, as required.

The next wave of introducing new talk shows was triggered by the Crimea annexation. During the Ukraine crisis, old and new talk shows that would normally be broadcast on a weekly basis turned into daily political marathons. In the fall of 2014, *Voskresnyi Vecher* split into weekend-survey and weekday programs, while Channel 1 launched *Struktura Momenta* and *Vremya Pokazhet,* respective analogues. In 2016 and 2017, Rossiya and Channel 1 further introduced the competing shows *60 Minut* and *Pervaya Studiya*, which air five and four days a week, respectively.

The talk shows that were central to the four media campaigns provided an abundance of ideologically charged political content that prioritized episodic framing over the thematic. Furthermore, because the captivating effect of the Ukrainian events started to wane, political talk shows have increasingly come to incorporate elements of the "Trash TV" genre, including casual swearing and brawls. During the Pussy Riot and anti-migration campaigns, the talk shows focused on specific incidents and individuals, ignoring broader trends and contexts, and evoked by association random stories about migrants or, in the case of the Pussy Riot affair, those deemed to engage in disruptive anti-social or purely criminal activities (Rossiya's *Poedinok*, March 15, 2012) During the annexation of Crimea and the Syrian campaign, talk shows have similarly applied deliberate over-personifications of complex issues, crude out-of-context generalizations, and blunt exaggerations. For example, during the Ukraine crisis radical figures among the pro-Maidan forces were used to personify the new Kiev regime and the entire Ukrainian nation. In the Syrian case, many details about the US fight against ISIS were omitted while others were deliberately highlighted to demonstrate America's purported impotence or even its complicity with the radicals.

Finally, during the television campaigns, a reliance on conspiracy theories to explain specific developments became particularly pronounced. As Yablokov (2018) shows, prior to 2012 state-controlled broadcasters tended to disseminate conspiratorial explanations of events, particularly at the time of elections. From 2012, reliance on such explanations has become systematic. Talk shows and "documentaries," produced to address key themes of the campaigns, utilized conspiracy theories particularly widely. During the Pussy Riot campaign, the punk group's performances were systematically represented as an international Russophobic plot aimed at weakening Russian statehood and generating internal discord (*Vesti Nedeli*, September 9, 2012). The culmination of this conspiratorial explanation was Arkadii Mamontov's series *Provokatory*, broadcast on Rossiya. During the anti-migration campaign, Rossiya's coverage of the influx of North Caucasians into Stavropol Krai suggested that the UK government was looking into ways of turning the region into Russia's

Kosovo (*Vesti Nedeli*, December 9, 2012). During the coverage of the annexation of Crimea, the events in Ukraine were systematically depicted as essentially an American or Western plot (*Politika*, February 24 and 26 and March 5, 2014; *Vesti Nedeli*, March 2, 2014; *Voskresnyi Vecher*, March 14 and 20, 2014; *Voskresnoe Vremya*, March 23, 2014). And in the coverage of the Syrian Civil War, both channels presented US actions as deliberately hindering Russian anti-terrorist efforts, and as only simulating a fight against ISIS, while indiscriminately arming radical Islamists (*Voskresnoe Vremya*, October 4, 2015; *Vesti Nedeli*, October 8, 2014). Rossiya's main news program ran a story about the ISIS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, possibly being a CIA agent (*Vesti*, October 12, 2015). The wider underlying interpretation of US actions in Syria was that they, above all, aimed at preventing the rebirth of Russia as a world power (*Voskresnyi Vecher*, October 11, 2015; *Politika,* October 14, 2015). By relying on conspiracy theories to explain domestic and international political developments, Russian broadcasters are again exploiting popular preferences. The growing popular appeal of a conspiratorial framing of political news is not just limited to Russia (Ortmann and Heathershaw 2012), but is a worldwide trend, particularly notable in the United States (Knight 2000; Butter and Reinkowski 2014; Uscinski and Parent 2014).

Dividing actors' roles

The final element of the new strategy, paradoxically, is the augmented role of selected, high-profile journalists in the articulation of official discourse, their following of the Kremlin's line during the annexation of Crimea notwithstanding. The emphasis placed by scholars on the increased instrumentality of the regime's use of the media since 2012 (Cottiero et al. 2015; Hansen 2015; Lankina 2016; Szostek 2016a, 2016b) tends to obscure the constitutive role played by broadcasters, which during Putin's third presidential term has, in fact, become more prominent. The reason for this change is that, as will be shown below, the broadcasters have been displaying significant agency in the articulation of new ideological messages and in finding impactful ways to address issues of public concern. Whereas the practice of regular meetings between representatives of the Kremlin and top media managers has continued, recent research and testimonies of former state-aligned media workers indicate that top journalists are allowed certain editorial autonomy within unwritten rules concerning what they must, can, and cannot broadcast (Insider 2015, 2017; Adamova 2017; Schimpfossl and Yablokov 2017).

Celebrity journalists in particular are aware of their role as co-producers rather than mere disseminators of official discourse and of the approved system of values. Thus, describing his own proactive role, Kiselev stated:

> [I act as] Jesus Christ. On television I have the role of the creator. This is not
> because I want it. This is because only 20 years have passed since the Soviet era
> … If English journalists found themselves in such a situation, they would have
> done the same [as us]. 100%. We are obliged to colonize our own country, and
> the English are excellent colonizers. They imposed their values in many parts of
> the world.[5]

[no new para] At times when the regime is actively attempting to shape such values, the role of broadcasters such as Kiselev can be expected to broaden. Thus, the conservative values agenda crystallized in the course of the televised Pussy Riot campaign, and celebrity journalists who moderated talk shows and news programs and produced "documentaries," such as Kiselev, Mamontov, Maksim Shevchneko, Andrei Malakhov, and Vladimir Solov'ev, played a leading role in its articulation. Only a year later, in September 2013, Putin himself for the first time made a reference to the need to defend the conservative values associated with world religions (Putin 2013).

During the anti-migration campaign, there was a distinct difference between the Kremlin's pronouncements and those of the broadcasters. The Russian federal government continued to maintain that migration was essential for the Russian economy, whereas the television channels depicted labor migrants as a force profoundly destructive for Russia and all societies in Europe (Tolz and Harding 2015). This discrepancy did not mean that the broadcasters were challenging the government position. It was more a case of simulating the regime's response to popular fears and anxieties surrounding migration, without the Kremlin having to make pronouncements that could be inflammatory and offensive for some residents. However, during the campaign the broadcasters had ample opportunity to articulate their own fears and prejudices against "the migrant Other" to a far greater extent than before, thereby publicly framing a highly topical, as well as sensitive, issue.[6]

In contrast, during the annexation of Crimea, official and televised identity discourses converged. Radical figures, such as Aleksandr Dugin and Aleksandr Prokhanov and outspoken ethnonationalists, such as Natalia Narochnitskaia and Egor Kholmogorov, were regularly invited to the talk shows to present their views without encountering much opposition from other guests or the hosts. Even Putin for the time unprecedentedly adopted similar Russo-centric rhetoric (Teper 2016). Television was again entrusted with creating a public demand for nationalist action that was later more moderately satisfied by the political leadership. Despite evident coordination between various broadcasts suggesting the existence of a strict, overarching editorial control, the agency of top broadcasters in the regime's efforts to suggest official interpretations of crucial political developments was also evident. For example, Solov'ev's strident talk show, *Voskresnyi Vecher*, was the first to employ a heavy ethnonational framing of the Ukrainian events (even before Viktor Yanukovich was ousted from the presidency), while the more cautious Channel 1 started to do so only a week later (*Voskresnyi Vecher*, February 19, 2014; *Politka*, February 26, 2014). Both channels' weekend news magazines joined the trend only at the beginning of March, when the annexation was well underway. Putin finally followed suit in adopting the ethnonationalist framing in his speech on the annexation later, in the middle of March (Putin 2014).

In a similar manner, on the first day of the media campaign around Syria, Solov'ev offered the stage to Semen Bagdasarov, his regular commentator on Middle Eastern issues, to discuss the purported religious underpinnings of the Syrian operation. According to Bagdasarov, the operation was necessary because of Syria's historical Orthodox heritage that made it "Russia's holy land" (*Voskresnyi Vecher*, September 30, 2015). The idea was picked up in

radical circles around the Orthodox Church (BBC 2015; Novikova 2015), but was not significantly continued in the mainstream media or Solov'ev's own program.

It could thus be deduced that within the framework of entrusted tasks and known limitations, celebrity journalists are allowed and in fact expected to suggest diverse interpretations and narratives regarding ongoing events. It is generally understood that occasionally these narratives will miss the Kremlin's ad hoc needs or the public's interest and will be quietly discarded. However, if significantly resonant with the public mood and the Kremlin's overall agenda, they could be widely adopted as the mainstream narrative. Such a cautiously experimental media approach imparts the system with significant flexibility and adaptability, atypical of more rigid authoritarian regimes.

Conclusions

Since 2012, the Russian state-controlled broadcasters' approach to coverage has undergone major changes. These changes mean that neither Oates' "neo-Soviet" model, nor the "neo-authoritarian" model in the form defined by Becker, capture the new strategy that the state-controlled television channels have been using during Putin's third presidential term in order to legitimize the regime in the wake of public protests. The new features introduced since 2012 relate to a significant increase in the air time devoted to political issues and in the intensity of ideological messaging. This qualitative change has been achieved alongside organizing television coverage around prolonged well-orchestrated campaigns on specific themes. So during Putin's third presidential term, television coverage has been no longer prioritizing de-politicized entertainment, as dominant descriptions of both the global media trends and neo-authoritarian media systems suggest and as was indeed the case with Russian television before 2012. The new approach does take into account that most viewers have limited political interests, or worse, may even be susceptible to accepting alternative narratives of political reality. Therefore, the popular appeal of an increasingly politicized media content is achieved through the expansion of "soft news" programming, such as talk shows, and the tabloidization of the political content itself.

This rise in political and ideological messaging does not, however, mean that the current approach can be explained in terms of a Soviet legacy, because of the profound differences in the representation and framing strategies deployed, the role of broadcasters in the articulation of official discourse, and the ways they attempt to engage audiences. Russian broadcasters tend to frame the coverage through referencing "global risks" that provoke anxiety not only in Russia but the world over. Broadcasters also systematically employ global media genres and formats to attract audiences, increasing the coverage of disruptive events and staging ceremonial media events more frequently than before. Thereby, the amplification of political messaging has been going hand in hand with making politics-related programming more dynamic, theatrical, and relevant to popular concerns. An opposition journalist and simultaneously a de facto Kremlin-approved "independent" candidate in the 2018 presidential elections, Ksenia Sobchak, perfectly summed up the nature and purpose of agitainment when announcing her intention to run: "You might make fun of me, of my past, but it is my intention to make this election a reality show…," one that above all plays out on the

television screen in particular (Caroll 2017). In this context, rather than seeing broadcasters simply as an instrument in the hands of the political leadership, television needs to be acknowledged as playing a constitutive role in the articulation of official discourse. Though the Kremlin maintains its general guiding role, it is broadcasters who are the chief producers of agitainment content, which has now emerged as the main media output of Russia's neo-authoritarian regime, putting global communication trends and innovation to its own advantage.

Hence, our findings challenge Oates' (2007) view that globalization has limited impact on the Russian media model compared to the Soviet legacy. Global communication trends and contemporary political realities, downplayed in Oates' neo-Soviet model, were the two most influential factors in shaping the Kremlin's post-2011 media strategy. However, we have also demonstrated that Russia's convergence with global and particularly Western media trends is not as straightforward as Hallin and Mancini (2003) anticipated. As is the case with other aspects of its hybrid regime, Russia adopts global media trends on its own terms. In Russian post-2011, state-aligned broadcasting, tabloidization of political coverage and an exclusionist identity discourse have been pushed to the extreme with the full support and encouragement of the top political leadership. Giving additional agency to leading journalists to forge political messages and yielding to authentic popular concerns has only increased the role of broadcasting as the regime's chief agitator, resulting in the crystallization of the specific agitainment format.

The Russian case and evidence from similar regimes elsewhere suggest a pattern of neo-authoritarian media conduct that complements Becker's (2014) neo-authoritarian model. In contrast to Becker's model, neo-authoritarian regimes appear willing to resort to extensive and intensive ideological messaging when they fear losing their monopoly over the formation of the public agenda. However, routinely this is indeed not the case. The existence of marginal critical media that do not affect the wider public does not trigger such conduct. The outlined pattern deserves more detailed comparative scrutiny, with particular attention paid to possible variations in regime behavior that might arise from differences in regime types included in the broad neo-authoritarian category.

Funding

Notes

For details on the project, see the note on Funding (immediately above) at the end of the article text.

1. The Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTSIOM) study was commissioned for the Kremlin's 2013 Valdai Discussion Club session fully dedicated to exploring Russia-related identity issues, thus revealing the Kremlin's concern with the subject.

2. Interview with Dmitrii Kiselev on 17 March 2013, within the framework of the "Mediating Post-Soviet Difference" project (see note 7).
3. For a description of the show on Channel 1's website see: http://www.1tv.ru/shows/politika/o-proekte.
4. See note 4. Interviews with a Rossiya journalist, 29 March 2013, and with a Channel 1 journalist, 3 April 2013.

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