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THE INSTRUMENTALISATION OF MASS MEDIA IN ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

Evidence from Russia's Presidential
Election Campaigns of 2000 and 2008

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Introduction

Research focus

Elections are assumed to empower people against authoritarian rule, bring about democratically elected government, and most importantly, serve as an instrument by which citizens hold the government accountable. However, despite the fact that most political systems in the twenty-first century hold at least some sort of elections, the same type of rulers appear to remain and rule in the same authoritarian fashion. Many authors (Lindberg 2009; McCoy and Hartlyn 2008; Brownlee 2009) claim that repeated elections can lead to democratisation¹. However, regardless of the regularity of elections in many authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes, incumbents use various tactics to manipulate voters' preferences or reduce the likelihood of opposition candidates being elected by changing electoral laws before election day (Birch 2011). One of the tools that leaders use to manipulate voters' preferences is the media. In democracies, the media's main task is to inform citizens, provide balanced coverage of political events, render political authorities accountable by monitoring their activities, and serve as a "marketplace" of ideas (Veltmer 2007; Dahl 1975). However, in states with weak democratic institutions, the situation is somewhat different.

¹ Lindberg's (2009: 41) research shows that "holding an increasing number of elections is by far the most important causal factor in increasing and spreading respect for civil liberties in Africa," Jason Brownlee also argues that "competitive elections increase the likelihood that democracy will succeed authoritarianism in the event of regime breakdown" (2009: 143).

Based on a case study of Russian media, I explore the role played by media in electoral authoritarian regimes in general, and in two sub-types specifically, i.e., competitive authoritarian and hegemonic authoritarian regimes, from a comparative perspective. I aim to determine how control of media access hinders the ability of the opposition to win elections and to discover the means by which the incumbent government uses its administrative resources to win elections. Furthermore, I explore the types of manipulation strategies that are used during electoral campaigns. One of the main arguments of the work is that in competitive authoritarian regimes, the media are among the main instruments used by the state to influence voters' choice and ensure regime stability.

Unlike fully authoritarian regimes, where democratic institutions either do not exist or exist only as a façade, in competitive authoritarian regimes, channels through which opposition can compete in executive elections do exist. In competitive authoritarian regimes, "democratic procedures are sufficiently meaningful for opposition groups to take them seriously as arenas through which they can contest for power (Levitsky and Way 2010: 7)." Rather than fully repressing the broadcasting media, competitive authoritarian regime governments prefer to use various strategies to influence reporting. Implementation of these strategies significantly reduces the opportunity for opposition forces to voice their views and opinions, let alone win elections. Mass media manipulation serves as an important instrument of regime stability. In other words, an incumbent manipulates broadcast media channels to win elections and legitimise his electoral success. As a result, in such regimes, the manipulation of media broadcasting is widespread.

The main goal of this work is to explore the role media play in competitive and hegemonic authoritarian regimes. I aim to find out how control of access to the media hinders opposition's chances to win elections and figure the strategies the incumbent government uses to manipulate media reporting. Furthermore, I am interested in types of manipulation strategies used during the electoral campaigns. One of the main arguments

of the work is that media is one of the key instruments used by the state to influence voters' choice and thus to ensure regime stability in competitive authoritarian regimes.

Object of the study The effects of media manipulation strategies that are used by the ruling elite on news media content in electoral authoritarian regimes.

Research questions How do the media manipulation strategies that are employed by the ruling elite in electoral authoritarian regimes affect news content? The question has four principal components: 1) Types and extent of media manipulation strategies; 2) Mechanisms of influence; 3) Media's reaction to the influence; and 4) Effects of these manipulations on news content.

What are the core differences in terms of media manipulation strategies and their effects on media content in competitive and hegemonic regimes?

Instrumentalisation of the media is best understood in the context of political and economic conditions. The principal issues discussed in this work involve the coping mechanisms of media companies, editors, and journalists in the changing political and economic environment; the interaction between the media, the state elite and the opposition; the financial and political considerations of the actors involved; the effects manipulation strategies have on news content or the information that the audience (i.e., voters) get; and finally, the effect that all these factors might have on election outcomes.

Placing relevant actors (i.e., the incumbent elite, opposition candidates, business elite, and the media) in their context to see how their actions are constrained by structural and institutional factors that are not of their own making reveals insightful details, which have not yet been studied. The principal goal of this work is to identify and map media manipulation strategies and to understand the effects that this manipulation has on news

content in electoral authoritarian regimes. Further, differences in media coverage between competitive and hegemonic authoritarian regimes are established.

Importance, relevance, and contribution to theory

A large body of literature exists on hybrid regimes - (Zakaria 1997; Merkel 2004; O'Donnell 2008; Schedler 2002; Ottaway 2003; Howard and Roessler 2006; Brownlee 2009; Levitsky and Way 2010), media effects (Lasswell 1935; Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1944; Klapper 1960; McQuail 1992; Marcuse 1964; Herman and Chomski 1988), electoral malpractices (Mozaffar and Schedler 2002; Birch 2007; 2011; Schedler 2002; 2013), and media systems (Siebert et al. 1956; Hallin and Mancini 2004; 2011). Many scholars have acknowledged the important role of media outlets during the 'colour' revolutions that led to electoral change in several countries (McFaul 2005; Bunce and Wolchik 2006). There have even been studies of media systems in new democracies (Votmer 2014) and studies of media effects on electoral outcomes in post-Soviet countries, mostly in relation to Russia (Enikolopov et al. 2011). However, systematic research on the role of the media in stabilising authoritarian rule in electoral autocracies has not yet been conducted. The key contributions of this work to the literature consist of the followings:

a) Bridging the literature on hybrid regime studies and electoral malpractices

Literature on hybrid regimes has expanded in recent decades. The debate revolves around the conceptualisation, classification, and operationalisation of such regimes. The categories proposed by scholars including Levitsky and Way (2010), Jason Brownlee (2009), Howard and Roessler (2006), and Schedler (2013) are well defined, and on a conceptual level, do not raise serious disagreements. However, the operationalisation and measurement criteria they use are problematic. On the one hand,

scholars do not agree about how to assign a type to a case, and on the other, their measurement criteria are sometimes arbitrary. I argue that existing quantitative measurements are not always sufficient to characterise the difference between various types of hybrid regimes. Therefore, I propose to examine the qualitative characteristics of regimes to improve operationalisation.

My research shows that the difference between competitive and hegemonic regimes is more qualitative than previously understood and should be studied accordingly. The difference is subtle, and for the operationalisation of these two regime types, merely examining levels of contestation or the percentage of votes received by a single candidate is insufficient. Mozaffar and Schedler (2002: 5) argue that “electoral governance is a crucial variable in securing the credibility of elections in emerging democracies”; however, electoral governance has not been given enough attention in comparative democratisation studies. Using the literature on electoral manipulation / electoral fraud / electoral integrity might provide greater clarity regarding the concepts of electoral authoritarian regimes and their operationalisation. Using Birch’s data set of electoral malpractice and the regime data sets of Howard and Roessler as well as of Levitsky and Way, I demonstrate that hegemonic and competitive regimes use different strategies to manipulate elections. Further research is needed to verify the results; however, based on this preliminary analysis, it can be argued that using data on electoral malpractice might solve the problem of drawing the boundaries between electoral authoritarian regime sub-types using quantitative approach.

b) Drawing a connection between the media and electoral outcomes in hybrid regimes

Various types of fraud/manipulations occur on and before election day; however, my research focuses on media manipulation strategies and their effect on news content—primarily because this area is an

understudied but prominent part of electoral authoritarian regimes. My quantitative analysis shows that media manipulation is the most commonly used strategy in both sub-types of electoral authoritarianism, although the two use it to a different extent. In the qualitative part, I draw a comparison between the extent and types of media manipulation in competitive and hegemonic regimes.

Some argue that the media has the potential to shape the voter's vision and interpretation of political events, and in certain settings, to contribute to election outcomes through the effects that the media has on the audience. In non-democracies the media is used to manipulate public opinion. In authoritarian electoral regimes, where electoral outcomes depend not only on vote buying, repression, or nullifying the election results, governments are keen to use the media to construct positive views of the favoured candidate. To do so, various tools are used. The effects of these manipulations are mirrored in the media content. Apart from the ability to influence media decisions regarding agenda setting and event framing, the incumbent can force some media outlets to introduce certain content bias in the reporting and can force journalists and media organisations into self-censorship. These different media manipulation strategies and their effects on news content are detailed in this work.

c) Detailed and systematic comparative analysis of media instrumentalisation in Russia

There is an extensive body of literature on the Russian media and its role in Russian politics. Studies have been conducted on the effects of media on election results (Colton and McFaul 2003; White, Oates and McAllister 2005; Oates 2006; Enikolopov, Petrova and Zhuravskaya 2011), the Russian media and its evolution dynamics (Koltsova 2001; Koltsova 2006; Zasurskii 2004; Roudakova 2009); media system types in Russia (Becker 2004; Vartanova 2011), journalists and journalistic professionalism (Voltmer 2000; Pasti 2005), television viewers in Russia (Mickiewicz 2005),

and the theme most closely related to this work, media instrumentalisation by the political elite (Lazitski 2013; Orttung and Walker 2014; Silitski 2009), the tightening of control over Russian television since Putin's rise to power and television content that aims at keeping the current regime in power (Lipman 2009; Lipman 2014; Gehlbach 2010; Burrett 2014), and on television content (Laruelle 2014; Rollberg 2014). Nonetheless, a detailed and systematic comparative analysis of media instrumentalisation in Russia across the two mentioned regime types is lacking. Some scholars including Walker and Orttung (2014), Silitski (2009), and Lazitsky (2013) have opened up the topic of media instrumentalisation. However, their work lacks the use of a systematic approach to studying the strategies that have been used by the ruling elite to influence the media. I aim to fill this gap by providing a systematic case study of media instrumentalisation and its effects on news content during presidential election campaigns.

d) Model illustrating the mechanisms of influence on media content

I develop a theoretical model (see the Figure 1) that aims to demonstrate the mechanisms that influence media content by placing pressure on news organisations and journalists; this model also depicts interactions between the actors. There is a constant information flow between the audience, the media, and political actors. The ruling elite attempts to influence media content by manipulating the legal framework; abusing state resources; coercion, etc. Journalists, in turn, calculate the risks associated with reporting on issues that are disapproved of by the state and act according to their best knowledge, their professional integrity and their own schema system. Some choose to report on issues that threaten the state's legitimacy or criticise the government or its policies, whereas others adjust to the demands of the ruling elite.

The model- illustrated in the Figure 1 presents a mechanism by which the media operates in electoral regimes. This model is derived from the theories of competitive authoritarianism, electoral authoritarianism,

electoral malpractice, and political communication. As observed in this model, in electoral authoritarian regimes, both the opposition and the ruling elite have access to the media; however, access is skewed in favour of the incumbent. As Schedler (2013) also notes, the incumbent has access to legal and state resources through which he or she can manipulate the media.

When the majority of the population uses television news as the main source of information on political events and in absence of alternative views in the media, voter's opinions are partly shaped by the information that they receive from the television. The media cannot tell people "what to do or what to think" (Cohen 1963), however, by setting the agenda, it can implicitly direct the debates in certain directions; and/or, by using different frames, the media can present reality in a way that advantages one actor over another. By priming certain issues, the media can nudge the citizens to evaluate the performance of the government using the benchmarks that are most often discussed in the media. In countries where people have a degree of trust in the media, they are more vulnerable to media influence-. The ruling elite manipulates the media environment, pressures journalists, and restricts media freedom in a way that best suits their interests. How exactly this is done, the nature of the manipulations that are used, and how the effects of these manipulations are mirrored in the media content is explicated in the case study of the Russian presidential elections of 2000 and 2008. This comparative case study demonstrates the difference in functioning of competitive and hegemonic regimes.