

U.S. Media Coverage of Competitive Authoritarian Regime in Russia: An Agenda-Setting Analysis

Submitted for publication in Political Communication journal

Cover sheet

Anastasia Kononova, Ph.D. (corresponding author)

Assistant Professor of Journalism and Communication

Humanities and Arts Division, American University of Kuwait

P.O. Box 3323, Safat 13034, Kuwait

Telephone: 1-802040 / (+965) 2-224-8399 ext. 447

Cellular phone: (+965) 5-518-9304

Fax: (+965) 2-574-9304

E-mails: akononova@auk.edu.kw; kononovaa@gmail.com

Saleem Alhabash, Doctoral Candidate

School of Journalism, University of Missouri

246 Walter Williams Hall

Columbia, MO 65211-1200

Telephone: +1 (573) 864-1722

Fax: +1 (573) 884-5400

E-mail: Saleem.Alhabash@mail.mizzou.edu

Wayne Wanta, Ph.D.

School of Journalism & Broadcasting, Oklahoma State University

206 Paul Miller Building

Oklahoma State University

Stillwater, OK 74078-4053

Telephone: +1 (405) 744-8206

Fax: +1 (405) 744-7104

E-mail: wayne.wanta@okstate.edu

Running head: COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIANISM AND 2008 RUSSIAN
ELECTION

**U.S. Media Coverage of Competitive Authoritarian Regime in Russia: An Agenda-
Setting Analysis**

U.S. Media Coverage of Competitive Authoritarian Regime in Russia: An Agenda-Setting Analysis

Abstract

A content analysis of three leading American media outlets examined the news coverage of 2008 Russian presidential elections to explore whether and how journalists use cognitive attributes of hybrid regimes, in particular, competitive authoritarianism. Results showed that the dynamics of the government-opposition relationship was crucial for the depiction of elections taking place in a competitive authoritarian regime. Incumbent Vladimir Putin and the candidate he endorsed, Dmitry Medvedev, were depicted as powerful and able to exert the influence over political processes, while opposition leaders were portrayed as weak and subject to unfair treatment. In addition, personality played an important role in the coverage of the elections: two most prominent figures, Putin and Medvedev, received the greatest amount of coverage. The results are discussed in light of American press tendency to associate Russia with the attributes of competitive authoritarianism, yet without developing a common term to describe such a hybrid regime.

Keywords: competitive authoritarianism, power, agenda setting, Russia, presidential elections

U.S. Media Coverage of Competitive Authoritarian Regime in Russia: An Agenda-Setting Analysis

The collapse of the Soviet Union was characterized by the emergence of hybrid political regimes, or regimes in transition from authoritarianism to democracy, in multiple countries. These states have been often viewed as prospective future democracies; however, some of them transformed into new nondemocratic regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2002). Diamond (2002) and Levitsky and Way (2002) proposed a new concept, competitive authoritarianism, to describe such hybrid regimes. The current study explored American media coverage of the 2008 Russian presidential elections to understand how journalists frame competitive authoritarian regimes. The main research question was whether reporters describe Russian political life using the binary democracy-authoritarianism distinction or whether they attempt to explain the emergence of a new form of political regime laying somewhere in between by assigning new cognitive attributes to the nation. First- and second-level agenda setting theories guided this research through its original hypothesis. Hence, the current study explored how media grant salience to certain objects as well as which cognitive attributes are assigned to these objects throughout the coverage.

The first part of this paper conceptualizes competitive authoritarianism as a way of understanding Russian political system in the post-Soviet era. Second, we review relevant literature on the agenda setting theory and conceptually link it to competitive authoritarianism. The method utilized in the current study is described in the third section, while the results are reported and discussed in the fourth and fifth sections, respectively.

Competitive Authoritarianism

Since the mid-70s, a vast number of countries in different parts of the world, including Eastern and Southern Europe, experienced dramatic political, social, and economic changes that were labeled by political scientists as transition to democracy (Carothes, 2002). These processes are often understood as a set of linear changes from authoritarianism to democracy (Rustow, 1970), where democracy is viewed as the ultimate outcome. Carothes (2002) refers to such changes through the lens of the “transition paradigm.” The paradigm entails a continuum on which countries in transition move away from authoritarianism or dictatorship toward the establishment of democratic institutions, where election is considered as a core component. Transition is viewed as a number of chronological changes, including the opening of political regime, regime collapse, and consolidation (Carothes, 2002, p. 7). In this context, the opening stage refers to democratization and liberalization of dictatorship from the inside. Regime collapse is characterized by political changes that include the official change of the government, which takes a political course toward democracy. Consolidation is the final stage, where democratic norms and values are slowly accepted by the society. The “transition paradigm” also suggests that democracy is a universal regime, which can be developed with little consideration of structural factors, such as economy, culture, and historical context, among others. In addition, Carothes (2002) argued that the supporters of “transition paradigm” did not distinguish between the process of the democratization of existing institutions and the process of building new democratic states from scratch.

The collapse of the Soviet Union raised additional hopes among those who believed democracy was the only outcome in the process of moving away from the

authoritarian rule. However, contemporary history shows that not all countries labeled “transitional” developed into democracies over time, even though some democratic institutions have been established (Levitsky & Way, 2002). This evidence, Carothers (2002) argues, led to the diminishing importance of “transition paradigm.” It appeared that moving away from authoritarianism does not always result in the establishment of a *true* democratic regime. The assumption that elections could substantially contribute to building democracy diffused due to evidence suggesting that political elites in some countries (for example, Russia) managed to falsify the results of elections or reverted to unfair competition among political actors. It also occurred that structural factors, “preconditions to democracy” (e.g., economic stability and political pluralism tradition in some Central European countries, Carothers, 2002, p. 16), could contribute to the process of transition. Finally, it also became obvious that the process of building a new state could interfere with the development of democracy (Carothers, 2002).

The emergence of new regimes that developed in a “gray zone” between authoritarianism and democracy (Carothers, 2002) underlined an important question of classification. Political scientists offered several terms to define hybrid regimes: semi-democracy, semi-authoritarianism, soft authoritarianism, illiberal democracy, and pseudodemocracy, among others (Levitsky & Way, 2002). Diamond (2002) proposed four types of regimes in transition: electoral democracy, ambiguous regime, competitive authoritarianism, and hegemonic electoral authoritarianism. These are placed on a continuum anchored by liberal democracy on one end and closed authoritarianism on the other. The author considered liberal democracy as somewhat of an ideal state, compared with electoral democracy, where democratic elections are guaranteed but some of the

liberties could be violated. Ambiguous regimes interchangeably possess characteristics of electoral democracies and competitive authoritarianism. Diamond (2002) stated that the possibility of political competition, even though it is often unfair, distinguishes competitive authoritarianism from hegemonic electoral authoritarianism, where the electoral institute and the representatives of opposition, if present, serve as a political façade. Finally, close authoritarianisms do not have “the architecture of political competition and pluralism” at all (Diamond, 2002, p. 26).

Noting the vagueness of classifications of new nondemocratic regimes, Levitsky and Way (2002, 2010) posited that competitive authoritarianism might contribute to decreasing the ambiguity of conceptualizing such regimes. According to Levitsky and Way (2010), competitive authoritarianism is a civilian regime

in which formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which fraud, civil liberties violations, and abuse of state and media resources so skew the playing field that the regime cannot be labeled democratic (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 4).

Although some democratic institutions function properly in a competitive authoritarian state where some civil liberties are protected, some human rights as well as freedom of the press are violated and political and economic resources are unequally distributed. Such regimes, then, are neither fully democratic nor utterly closed authoritarian. Unlike closed authoritarianism, competitive authoritarianism allows opposition to function in the state. However, the assumption that pro-government and opposition parties do not have equal resources to participate in political processes distinguishes competitive authoritarianism from democracy. While eligible to take part in election, political

opposition parties in a competitive authoritarian state lack the means and resources of political participation. Thus, political competition is present, yet unfair (Levitsky & Way, 2002, 2010).

Levitsky and Way (2002) distinguished among four areas affected by competitive authoritarian rule: legislative, judicial, media, and electoral. Although legislative and judicial powers are independent from the executive branch *de jure*, they are either weak or subordinated with the use of different “mechanisms of co-optation” (Levitsky & Way, 2002, p. 56). The media system in a competitive authoritarianism is similar to what Becker (2004) called neo-authoritarian media system. It allows open media access, private media ownership, and media independence, but authorities use subtle mechanisms to restrict journalists’ practice of media’s watchdog role (Becker, 2004, p. 149).

Probably, the most important distinctive feature of competitive authoritarianism is related to the electoral process and the relationships between the authorities and the opposition. Although political opponents of the ruling party are limited in resources, often attacked, and treated unfairly during political competitions, they represent a real opposition force rather than function as a mere democratic façade.

While political scientists pay close attention to political developments supporting or negating the posits of the “transition paradigm,” the present study attempts to understand how such regimes are represented in the media. The study explored whether journalists acknowledge the emergence of competitive authoritarian regimes and how they depict them in news. We focused on the coverage of elections in a competitive authoritarian state and the dynamics of the relationships between the government and the opposition. Following previous research (Levitsky & Way, 2002, 2010), we picked

Russia as an example of competitive authoritarianism. We examined the coverage of Russian presidential election of 2008 in The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Associated Press.

Russian Presidential Election

In the 1990s, the Russian Federation was considered as a nation in transition, among many “democracies” that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, it did not develop into a fully functioning democratic entity (Diamond, 2002; Levitsky & Way, 2002, 2010; McFaul, 2005). Instead, it became a “gray-zone” state, where the government controls official democratic institutions (McFaul, 2005). The context of the latest Russian presidential elections is important for several reasons. First, an election provides a maximum opportunity of exposure with regards to media coverage. Second, the relationships between the Russian government and its opposition become central during elections. Finally, the nature of the 2008 elections was an interesting political event, especially with questions about the direction of political change in the post-Putin era.

The former president of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, gained enormous popularity and power during his two-term presidency. By the end of the second term, Putin officially announced that he would support Dmitry Medvedev, the first Russian deputy prime minister to run for presidency. Medvedev was not the sole candidate on the ballot. The ballot also included Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation; Andrei Bogdanov, the leader of Democratic Party of Russia; and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the leader of Liberal Democratic Party of Russia. In addition, candidates Mikhail Kasyanov and Garry Kasparov withdrew or were not allowed to

participate in the official presidential race due to some “technical reasons” interpreted by journalists as a threat to the government (Finn, 2007, p. A12; 2008, p. A10). Medvedev’s competitors were viewed as not strong enough to win the election, and three months after Putin’s endorsement, Medvedev became the next president of the Russian Federation.

The dynamics of the 2008 Russian presidential elections enhance the classification of Russia from Levitsky and Way’s (2002) competitive authoritarianism perspective. First, powerful pro-governmental elites (the Putin-Medvedev duo) were present. Second, opposition leaders (Kasyanov, Kasparov, Zyuganov, Zhirinovskiy) participated in the presidential race. Finally, the distribution of resources (financial, military, and media) was rather in favor of powerful pro-government actors than weak and harassed opposition.

The current study utilized the competitive authoritarianism perspective on three different levels: political actors, political events, and political regime. First, competitive authoritarianism theory was used to explicate the cognitive attributes attached to politicians and/or political groups, which were directly or indirectly involved with the elections. Examples of such attributes include powerful, electable, successor, weak, and under attack. Second, an exploration of the issues on which the American press focused in the coverage of the elections was expected to explicate the determinants of competitive authoritarianism in action. Third, we looked at the depiction of Russia as a whole with regards to its political regime.

To investigate how competitive authoritarianism “reveals itself” on the pages of American press, we applied agenda setting theories. In particular, we examined the role of media in setting the public agenda not only through exploring object and issue salience

(first-level agenda setting) but also through investigating the *how* by analyzing the cognitive attributes of salient objects and issues (second-level agenda setting). The following section reviews the literature on the agenda setting theory.

Agenda Setting: Beyond Issue Salience

For more than three decades, mass communication researchers have empirically studied the effects of media by utilizing the agenda-setting hypothesis. McCombs and Shaw (1972), based on Lippmann's (1922) notion of the *pictures in our heads*, postulated that the role of media in politics is characterized by their influence on individual attention to and perceived importance of certain issues (salience). Their explication was grounded in Cohen's (1963) work, where he stated that "the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (Cohen, 1963, p. 13). Shaw (1979) analyzed the first stream of agenda setting research and noted that the study of agenda setting focuses on understanding how media affect people by making them "aware or not aware, pay attention to or neglect, play up or downgrade specific features of the public scene" (Shaw, 1979, p. 96). This conceptualization deals with the transmission of object salience from the media to the public agenda. McCombs and Ghanem (2001) explained that agenda setting could be understood through the framework of objects that vary among people (politicians), events, or even commercial brands.

While first-level agenda setting helps researchers identify the issues covered by the media and their salience in the public mind, second-level agenda setting focuses on how people think about salient issues based on cognitive and affective attributes present in the media coverage (Ghanem, 1997). According to McCombs and Ghanem (2001), the

purpose of the second-level agenda setting is to “fill out the picture of each object” by explaining their “characteristics and properties” (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001, p. 68).

The role of media can be crucial in shaping public thoughts about political objects and processes. Golan and Wanta (2001) argued that second-level agenda setting is essential in studying the coverage of electoral processes. While voters depend on the media to learn about political developments, the way in which media cover candidates and campaigns shapes how voters think about them (Golan & Wanta, 2001).

The second-level agenda setting deals with object or issue attributes and their effects on public opinion (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). Ghanem (1997) outlined four main dimensions of the second-level agenda setting, which are subtopics, framing mechanisms, cognitive, and affective attributes. To examine how American journalists cover elections in competitive authoritarian states, we focused on three types of objects: politicians and/or political groups (authorities and opposition), political issues, and the state as a whole, and their cognitive attributes.

As Levitsky and Way (2002, 2010) pointed out, in a competitive authoritarian regime, the ruling political elites have a greater amount of resources (e.g., economic, military, or informational) than the opposition and can exert their influence over political and media processes. Taking this into consideration, we asked whether this influence projected to the area of foreign, in particular, American, press coverage with regards to the amounts of coverage and cognitive attributes political leaders and groups received. Thus,

RQ1.1: Did the coverage of Russian political authorities exceed the coverage of political opposition leaders and groups?

RQ 1.2: How were cognitive attributes of power and weakness assigned to Russian political leaders and/or political groups throughout the American media coverage of the Russian elections?

RQ 1.3: How were Russian political leaders and/or political groups depicted with regards to the ability to determine the results of the presidential elections 2008?

According to the model of competitive authoritarianism, the opponents of the powerful regime, although being present on political arena, are treated unfairly in a political competition. Thus, we asked:

RQ1.4: Were the opposition leaders and/or groups depicted as being treated unfairly by the government, compared with the pro-government candidate?

In competitive authoritarian states, ruling political actors have access and control over economic, military, and other resources (Levitsky & Way, 2002, 2010), making the power attribute salient. Other scholars add that in nondemocratic regimes, such as Russia, powerful political elites lack clear political ideology (Gel'man, 2006; Reuter & Remington, 2009) and determined course of political actions; hence, power becomes an ideology in and of itself. We were specifically interested in this dimension in the current study to see whether and how political leaders and groups in power and in opposition differ with regards to their political standpoints. Thus, we explored the campaign issues that were attributed to specific politicians/political groups. We asked:

RQ1.5: How did pro-government and opposition politicians and/or political groups differ with regards to their political ideology throughout the American media coverage of the Russian elections?

RQ1.6: How did pro-government and opposition politicians and/or political groups differ in regards to campaign issues attributed to them throughout the American media coverage of the Russian elections?

According to competitive authoritarianism theory, despite the existence of electoral institutions, some of the liberties and rights of citizens are violated. Our question was whether and how American journalists addressed such issues in the coverage of the Russian presidential campaign 2008. Thus, we considered issues not only as attributes of politicians but also as independent objects of analysis. We asked,

RQ2.1: What issues and in what proportion were present in the American media coverage of the Russian elections?

Each issue as an independent object was analyzed in correspondence with cognitive attributes linked to it. The list of issue cognitive attributes was borrowed from Entman (1993), Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), and Kiousis and Shields (2006). “Six substantive attributes that have consistently emerged in research are the conflict, human interest, problem definition, responsibility attribution, moral evaluation, and consequence assessment frames” (Kiousis & Shields, 2006, p. 7).

RQ2.2: What cognitive attributes were associated with issues present in the American media coverage of the Russian elections?

Finally, we asked whether American journalists made attempts to describe the Russian nation as a whole in relation to its political regime. We were interested in exploring the proportion of the coverage dedicated to discussing Russia as a country as well as the type of cognitive attributes to which Russia was attributed. We asked,

RQ3.1: What proportion of the American media coverage of the Russian elections was devoted to Russia as a whole?

RQ3.2: What cognitive attributes were associated with Russia in the American media coverage of the Russian elections?

Method

This study employed the method of quantitative content analysis to answer the proposed research questions. One hundred and forty two news stories about 2008 presidential election in Russia published by The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Associated Press, were examined. The articles were found via LexisNexis search engine conducted for the period between December 2007 to May 2008, therefore allowing for three months before and after the Russian presidential elections.

The selected stories were content analyzed by appearance of selected objects that corresponded with the following three categories: Russian politicians (then-president and political candidates) and/or political groups, campaign issues, and Russia as a whole. A total of 2,605 cases were included in the analysis. Each object's appearance was then coded for its cognitive attributes. Cognitive attribute variables included personal characteristics and issues as attributes of politicians, attributes of issues, and Russia as a whole. Two independent coders performed the coding of news stories. About 11 percent of articles were double-coded, where Holsti's formula was calculated, resulting in 75 percent agreement between the two coders.

Politicians and/or political groups. Seven Russian politicians who actively participated in 2008 Russian presidential campaign were included in the analysis: Vladimir Putin, then-President of the Russian Federation; Dmitry Medvedev, then-First

Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation and the presidential candidate; Andrei Bogdanov, leader of the Democratic Party of Russia and the presidential candidate; Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and the presidential candidate; Gennady Zyuganov, leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and the presidential candidate; Mikhail Kasyanov, leader of the People's Democratic Union, former prime minister of Russia, and the member of an opposition coalition The Other Russia; Garry Kasparov, former chess champion, leader of the United Civil Front, and the member of the opposition coalition The Other Russia. For the ease of some statistical analyses, we collapsed politicians' categories into two main groups: government/pro-government politicians, which included Putin and Medvedev, and the opposition referring to the rest of politicians.

Cognitive attributes of politicians and/or political groups included the attributes that could fully describe the nature of the relationships between the pro-governmental forces and the opposition. These were powerful, weak, winner, successor, and treated unfairly (Golan & Wanta, 2001). Each attribute was coded as a dummy variable, with 1 meaning the presence of the attribute and 0 meaning the absence of the attribute. To clarify, "power" predominantly referred to the ability to control resources and exert influence over political and social processes. On the contrary, "weakness" was related to the lack of resources. "Treated unfairly" attribute was assigned when the violation of political candidate rights was described. Political ideology attributes, such as communist, liberal, conservative were also added to the rubric and coded as dummy variables. Finally, the association of campaign issues with politicians was coded for in this study. Some issues were borrowed from previous studies (Golan & Wanta, 2001) and some

were derived from the informational and analytical website of the Russian presidential election www.Vibori.net. The issues included in the analysis were reforms, economy, corruption/bureaucracy, human rights protection/focus on democracy, demographic problem, freedom of the press, foreign policy, social issues, candidate's past, and campaign analysis.

Issues. Along with issues as cognitive attributes of politicians and/or political groups, these issues were analyzed as independent objects, mostly when they were identified as main objects of a news story or a paragraph. The same list of issues was employed: reforms, economy, corruption/bureaucracy, human rights protection/focus on democracy, demographic problem, freedom of the press, foreign policy, social issues, candidate's past, and campaign analysis (Golan & Wanta, 2001; www.Vibori.net, 2008). Due to an overwhelming majority of issues corresponding with the campaign analysis category (96 percent), we collapsed all issues to two categories: campaign analysis and other issues.

Cognitive attributes of issues, such as conflict, human interest, problem definition, responsibility attribution, moral evaluation, and consequence assessment, were also included in the analysis as a separate variable (Entman, 1993; Kioussis & Shields, 2006; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

Russia as a whole. The last object of analysis was the whole nation, Russia. There were three main cognitive attributes (political regimes) associated with the country as a whole: democracy, authoritarianism, and "gray-zone" regime, which could correspond to the description of competitive authoritarianism.

Results

A total of 142 stories published in The New York Times (33 stories), The Washington Post (47 stories), and The Associated Press (62 stories) from December 2007 till May 2008 were content-analyzed. A total of 2,605 cases of object appearance were indicated; 638 cases in The News York Times, 627 cases in The Washington Post, and 1,340 cases in The Associated Press stories.

Frequency distributions, chi-square and Cramer's Phi analyses were computed to answer the research questions. Chi-squares included nominal variables with two levels each, and Phi or Cramer's V values were calculated for tests that included one or two variables with three levels.

Who's Being Covered: Politicians and Political Groups

Research question 1.1. asked about the amount of coverage that Russian politicians and/or political groups that participated in the elections received. Results showed that then-President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin received 34 percent of the coverage. Vladimir Putin was followed by Dmitry Medvedev who received about 32 percent of the coverage. The opponents of Putin and Medvedev received only 16 percent of the coverage, leaving another 18 percent to the depiction of other politicians. In sum, government/pro-government politicians received nearly two-thirds of the coverage, with only one-third given to opposition leaders.

Research question 1.2. asked how cognitive attributes of power and weakness were assigned to Russian political leaders and/or political groups throughout the American media coverage of the Russian elections. Chi-square tests indicated that the Putin-Medvedev tandem was covered as a more powerful political group than their

opponents taken altogether. The significant results ($X^2(1) = 104.94, p < .01$) indicated that the Putin-Medvedev duo was depicted as having power in 21.3 percent of cases, which was substantially higher compared with .2 percent of cases for the opposition. Moreover, a chi-square analyses indicated that Putin was evaluated by American journalists as much more powerful politician (86.3 percent) than Medvedev (13.7 percent), $X^2(1)=222.84, p < .01$. The result was reversed when the weakness attribute was entered in the analysis ($X^2(1)=45.60, p < .01$), which indicated that Medvedev was portrayed as a weaker politician (83.7 percent) than Putin (16.3 percent). Interestingly enough, compared with Putin, Medvedev did not “gain” power in media coverage after the elections. After the elections, Putin was covered as powerful in 76 percent of cases, while Medvedev – only in 24 percent of cases ($X^2(1)=12.47, p < .01$).

As for the association of the weakness attribute with other politicians and/or political groups, statistical analyses did not give clear results. Although a chi-square test indicated statistical significance, ($X^2(1) = 46.02, p < .01$), it was mostly due to the fact that this attribute was not used in most of the cases (93 percent). Additional nonparametric analyses ($\Phi(2)=.19, p < .01$) showed that Putin was less likely to be depicted as weak (1.6 percent). However, both Medvedev and the opposition representatives were closer to each other with regard to this attribute (8.7 and 14.3 percent, respectively).

Research question 1.3 asked how Russian political leaders and/or political groups were depicted with regards to the ability to determine the results of the presidential elections 2008. Thus, we tested whether media depicted Medvedev as Putin’s successor and the election winner. As shown by a Phi test ($\Phi(2)=.39, p < .01$), compared with Putin (1 percent) and the opposition (1.5 percent), Medvedev “monopolized” the association

with the attribute of successor (97.5 percent). The attribute of winner was also predominantly assigned to Medvedev during the three months before the elections (97.1 percent) and not to his opponents (2.9 percent), $X^2(1)=38.34$, $p<.01$.

Research question 1.4 asked whether the opposition leaders and/or groups were depicted as being treated unfairly by the government, compared with the pro-government candidate. A total of 18.6 percent of coded cases mentioned unfair treatment and attacks; all of them involved opposition. Further analysis indicated that in 98.7 percent of cases, violations were discussed in relations to Kasparov and Kasyanov, who withdrew or were forced to quit their participation in the campaign rather than to legal presidential candidates Bogdanov, Zyuganov, and Zhirinovskiy ($X^2(1)=68.63$, $p<.01$).

Research question 1.5 asked how politicians “in power” and their opponents differed in regards to their political ideology in the coverage by the American press. Two most commonly used political ideology attributes in the coverage were liberal and communist (conservatism was not mentioned in the coverage at all). Interestingly enough, while the representative of “old power,” Vladimir Putin was not associated with either of the two ideologies; Medvedev was often portrayed as liberal (63.6 percent); and opposition leaders were depicted as liberals in 33.3 percent of cases ($\Phi(2)=.01$, $p<.01$). Only a small portion of opposition leaders was associated with the communist ideology (7.2 percent, $\Phi(2)=.24$, $p<.01$).

Research question 1.6 asked about issues as cognitive attributes of candidates. Surprisingly, but in most cases, the coverage of the Russian presidential election did not link Russian political figures to any of the outlined issues. Only Putin and Medvedev were connected to some issues. Putin was associated with economic growth (5.4 percent)

and strict and uncompromised foreign policy (5.5 percent). This politician's past was also described in the stories (3.5 percent). Medvedev was also linked to foreign policy (4.7 percent) but in a more positive sense, compared to Putin. American media also focused on Medvedev's impact on economy (4.3 percent), protection of human rights and democratic values (2.5 percent), and past (2.3 percent).

What's being covered: Issues

The second set of research questions in this study asked about the coverage of different campaign issues as independent objects. Research question 2.1 asked what issues and in what proportion were present in the American media coverage of the Russian elections. About 65 percent of the coverage was devoted to the narrow analysis of Russian presidential campaign, in particular, political processes taking place on the level of the Russian political elites, rather than the impact that the campaign could have on the Russian nation. Foreign policy received about 1 percent of the coverage. The frequency analysis also showed that issues such as reforms, economy, corruption/bureaucracy, demographic problem, freedom of the press, and candidate's past were rarely used as independent objects in news stories (less than 1 percent of coverage per issue).

Research question 2.2 asked what cognitive attributes were associated with issues present in the American media coverage of the Russian elections. Answering this question, we illuminated that the most popular issue, campaign analysis, was presented via a problem definition frame (50.7 percent), consequence assessment frame (37.6 percent, 635 cases), and conflict frame (10.3 percent, 174 cases). Problem definition was

also the most frequent attribute of foreign policy (44.8 percent, 13 cases) along with the conflict attribute (37.9 percent, 11 cases).

What's being covered: The Russian Federation

Research question 3.1 asked what proportion of the American media coverage of the Russian elections was devoted to Russia as a whole. It was indicated that Russia as a whole was mentioned in the analyzed coverage in only about 10 percent of cases.

Research question 3.2 asked about cognitive attributes with which Russia as a whole was associated. In 90 percent of analyzed cases, reporters did not refer to Russia as an independent object of a story; they focused on Russian politicians involved in the presidential campaign and the campaign analysis. In 5.5 percent of cases, Russia was viewed as an authoritarian regime, a non-democratic state, and the authoritarian or totalitarian follower of the Soviet Union. Only in 0.3 percent of cases, Russia was presented as a democracy, the frame that was, according to our qualitative observation, mostly used by Russian official sources of information. The category "Other" was relatively large (3.8 percent). It involved various characteristics of Russia such as an independent country, oligarchy, country with a growing economy, country in transition, country with a dual-power political structure, among others. However, these characteristics, although identifying Russia as different from pure authoritarian state, did not present a unifying cognitive attribute (such as competitive authoritarianism).

Discussion

The results of this study indicated that Russian presidential election was depicted by the American press in accordance with competitive authoritarianism paradigm. Ruling political groups and persons (Putin/Medvedev) were assigned the attribute of power,

meaning that they were depicted as having control over resources and being able to interfere with political processes. Further analyses indicated that the attribute of power was predominantly assigned to Putin, even in after-elections news coverage. In addition, then-president Putin's appointee, Medvedev, was clearly depicted as Putin's successor and the winner of the presidential race. An interesting result was indicated regarding the weakness attribute. Both the opposition leaders and Medvedev were portrayed as weak, compared with Putin; however, only the government opponents were depicted as being treated unfairly during the campaign. The latter is consistent with one of the assumptions of competitive authoritarianism, which states that political opposition is active in such regime, however, is deprived of resources to participate in political processes freely and equally.

The analysis of cognitive attributes derived from the model of competitive authoritarianism reveals not only the importance of exploring the news coverage of the relationship between politicians in power and the opposition. It also emphasizes the role of personality in such coverage. For example, persons in power, Putin and Medvedev, obviously set the agenda for American journalists as they received the greatest amounts of coverage than their opponents. However, these politicians were covered somewhat differently. Putin was depicted as a powerful figure without any clear political ideology, while Medvedev was portrayed as a weaker but more liberal politician. The limitation of this study was related to our inability to extend the analyses to each single leader of Russian opposition. These political figures were simply not covered enough, which made statistical comparisons not possible. Furthermore, to stress the personal character of the news coverage even more, it was found that the most popular issue linked to politicians

was related to the descriptions of candidate past. In addition, only Putin and Medvedev were associated with other issues, such as economic growth and foreign policy. This interesting finding suggests future researchers to focus on the role of powerful politicians in nondemocratic states and their media portrayals.

As competitive authoritarianism theoretical framework implies, in such regime, some of citizens' rights and liberties are violated and the government often uses subtle illegal mechanisms (i.e., bribing) to "neutralize" independent legislative, judicial, and media institutions (Levitsky & Way, 2002, 2010). Thus, we expected that the American press would particularly focus on issues, such as human rights, corruption and bureaucracy, freedom of the press, reforms, and others, in the coverage of Russian presidential elections 2008. The results of the study did not meet our expectations. We found that media outlets moved away from covering political, economic, and social issues that were linked to the electoral race. The coverage mostly focused on interactions and conflicts among Russian politicians, and prognoses on changes in power within the Russian political establishment rather than the significant impacts of the election on the Russian nation. This finding can be partially explained by the fact that we selected foreign (American) news coverage of Russian presidential elections to answer the research questions. Media might simply not devote as much resources to the coverage of political events in other countries, and this could result in limited, not complete coverage of the elections. We suggest future research to be directed toward comparative analyses of how domestic and foreign press covers political processes taking place within competitive authoritarianisms. Another idea for comparative research develops based on possible differences between the coverage of political issues in nondemocratic and more

democratic countries. As politicians' positions on various issues extensively depicted by media and mediated issue debates are important components of political campaigns in democratic states, it is extremely important to look at whether the lack of the focus on political and socially significant issues becomes a pattern for the coverage of competitive authoritarianisms.

Overall, the study indicated that Russia was assigned the necessary attributes of competitive authoritarianism in the coverage by the American press. Journalists did not ignore the fact that democratic institutions, such as presidential elections, were established in Russia. These institutions, however, were depicted as not functioning properly. In particular, the news coverage focused on representations of the government-opposition relationship: pro-government political elites were portrayed as having power and resources to control political processes while the opposition was described as being constantly under the government's attack and having limited resources and opportunities to participate in politics. Journalists, however, did not agree on a common attribute to assign to the Russian state. Russia was depicted as an authoritarian regime, country in transition, dual-power state, oligarchy, etc. This finding suggests that new frames and attributes that could more precisely describe the new political phenomenon reflecting non-democratic hybrid regimes have not yet emerged in the media world.

References

- Becker, J. (2004). Lessons from Russia: A neo-authoritarian media system. *European Journal of Communication, 19*(2), 139-63.
- Carothes, T. (2002). The end of the transition paradigm. *Journal of Democracy, 13*(1), 45-69.
- Cohen, B. (1963). *The press and foreign policy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Diamond, L. J. (2002). Thinking about hybrid regimes. *Journal of Democracy, 13*(2), 21-35.
- Entman, R. (1993). Framing toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication, 43*(4), 51-58.
- Finn, P. (3 December 2007). Russian voter turn out for Putin and United Russia. *The Washington Post*, A12. Retrieved from LexisNexis on 15 October 2008.
- Finn, P. (23 January 2008). A Russian candidacy in peril; Authorities scrutinize Putin foe's campaign. *The Washington Post*, A10. Retrieved from LexisNexis on 15 October 2008.
- Gel'man, V. (2006). From "feckless pluralism" to dominant power politics? The transformation of Russia's party system. *Democratization, 13*(4), 545-61.
- Golan, G., & Wanta, W. (2001). Second level agenda setting in the News Hampshire primary: A comparison of coverage in three newspapers and public perception of candidates. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, 78*(2), 247-59.
- Kiousis, S. & Shields, A. (2006). Intercandidate agenda-setting in presidential elections: Issue and attribute agendas in the 2004 campaign. Paper presented to the *Public Relations Division for the annual International Communication Association conference*, 19-23 June, Dresden, Germany.
- Levitsky, S. & Way, L. (2002). The rise of competitive authoritarianism, *Journal of Democracy, 13*(2), 51-65.
- Levitsky, S. & Way, L. (2010). *Competitive authoritarianism: The origins and dynamics of hybrid regimes in the Post-Cold War era*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public opinion*. New York: Macmillan.
- McCombs, M. & Ghanem, S. (2001). The convergence of agenda setting and framing. In S.D. Reese, O.H. Gandy & A.E. Gant (eds.), *Framing public life: Perspectives on media and our understanding of the social world* (pp. 67-81). Mahwah, NJ:

Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- McCombs, M. & Shaw, D. (1972). The agenda-setting function of the mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36, 176-87.
- McFaul, M. (2005). Transitions from Postcommunism. *Journal of Democracy*, 16(3), 5-19.
- Reuter, O. J. & Remington, T. (2009). Dominant party regimes and the commitment problem: The case of United Russia. *Comparative Political Studies*, 42, 501-525.
- Rustow, D. (1970). Transitions to Democracy: Toward a dynamic model. *Comparative Politics*, 2(3), 337-63.
- Semetko, H. & Valkenburg, P. (2000). Framing European politics: A content analysis of press and television news. *Journal of Communication*, 50, 93-109.
- Shaw, E. (1979). Agenda-setting and mass communication theory. *International Communication Gazette*, 25, 96-104.