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MAKING SENSE OF THE NEWS UNDER AN ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

RUSSIAN TV VIEWERS AND THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE
CONFLICT

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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on how Russian TV viewers make sense of the news in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. It is based on focus groups with TV viewers and borrows the conceptual apparatus of political communication, psychology, and political science to analyze three separate domains of news processing under an electoral authoritarian regime: the formation of political opinions based on television news, the use of heuristics to evaluate the credibility of TV news, and the use of a range of information sources, both offline and online, in a high-choice media environment. Based on the existing literature, this study relies on the premise that citizens under authoritarian regimes lack incentives, cognitive tools, and opportunities to substantively process news and investigates how these three features are reflected in the political psychology and news processing of TV viewers. First, this study contributes to the literature on news processing under electoral authoritarian regimes. While scholars have identified numerous factors which affect how citizens (dis)trust news in authoritarian contexts, the role of political engagement in news processing is rarely taken into account in the analysis of electoral authoritarian regimes. My findings suggest that political engagement crucially affects how citizens make sense of the news. I find that a minority of focus group participants are politically engaged and rely on consistent political schemas to make sense of the news and demonstrate signs of consistency bias. Most participants are politically disengaged. They rely on the ideas which are more accessible in memory, contain both criticism and approval of state policies, and support the authoritarian equilibrium by being unable to articulate consistent opinions. Second, this study contributes to a better understanding of the functioning of low-information rationality under an electoral authoritarian regime. Scholars assume that in dealing with the news and political information, TV viewers rely on a wide variety of heuristics which are drawn from both daily life and the political environment. However, the literature on how citizens use heuristics outside democratic contexts is limited. I find that in dealing with the news, TV viewers prefer to rely on common sense and cultural stereotypes because political and media institutions under an electoral authoritarian regime are not seen as independent and authoritative. Finally, the study contributes to a better understanding of how the development of high-choice media environments affects news processing outside of democratic contexts. I find that politically engaged participants often find information which fits their pre-existing

preferences demonstrating signs of selective exposure. Participants who are less politically engaged participants rely on TV news in combination with news aggregators to simplify information search. Since Russian news aggregators include information which is not different from TV news, this synchronization verifies the credibility of TV news. While the original concept of the personalized filter bubble is based on the complex interaction between individuals' preferences and algorithms, I identify the orchestrated filter bubble effect which is based on the agenda of state-controlled television. Imposed in top-down fashion by the state, this filter bubble effect is used to reinforce the messages of the state-controlled television rather than citizens' individual preferences under an electoral authoritarian regime.

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One can say that this project started in Winter 2013-2014 when Russian state-aligned media switched to a new mode of functioning in response to the protests in Ukraine. Not that Russian television channels were particularly prone to follow the rules of objective journalism before, but this mode was characterized by particularly aggressive and biased reporting. This, in turn, provoked scholars, experts, and commentators to fill the intellectual public sphere with simplistic narratives about information war and citizens as victims of crude propaganda. While not a media scholar yet, I was working on my master's thesis and involved in a number of research projects on social movements in Russia and Ukraine as part of a self-organized independent research group called the Public Sociology Laboratory. The complexity of political engagement which I regularly encountered in my fieldwork was a good demonstration that citizens who are exposed to political information are far from being passive victims of propaganda: they actively interpret media messages in complex and diverse ways. This initial intuition became the cornerstone of this dissertation.

Most research projects are collective endeavors. This dissertation is not an exception. Many people invested their time and effort in helping to transform this initial intuition into a dissertation. The number of people who invested their time and effort in helping to transform this initial intuition into a dissertation is great. There is simply not enough space to thank all of them, and I have to limit myself to several names. I started this journey at the European University at St. Petersburg. I want to thank Artemy Magun – my first supervisor – for encouraging me to venture into this area. The members of my first doctoral committee – Ellen Mickiewicz, Olessia Koltsova, and Boris Firsov - also significantly contributed to this work by providing insightful feedback. Special gratitude goes to Ellen Mickiewicz for being both a wonderful person and a theoretical inspiration who shaped my understanding of media early on. Through her attention to the complexity of human judgment and methodological rigor I felt what one can call a lineage – from Ellen Mickiewicz to Doris Graber, from Doris Graber to Robert Lane and other key scholars in the field combining rigorous psychological theory with in-depth close observation of small groups of people. Thanks to generous funding of the European University at St. Petersburg, I later spent several months at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University where I had a chance to observe Ellen Mickiewicz's profound expertise and wit during our regular meetings.

After this visiting fellowship at Duke University, the educational license of the European University at St. Petersburg was revoked under the pretext of violation of licensing rules. As this university is one of the best social science graduate schools in Russia, it was clear that the real reason was its role in shaping critical intellectual community. After some time in a limbo with no clear prospects to defend the dissertation, a joint effort of colleagues from the University of Helsinki and the European University at St. Petersburg helped me and other ex-EUSP PhD students to transfer to the University of Helsinki. I thank Ira Janis-Isokangas and other colleagues from the Aleksanteri Institute for making this transfer happen and hosting me during YRUSH fellowship which allowed me to further advance my dissertation. A special gratitude goes to Vladimir Gel'man for his tremendous contribution to this undertaking, but also for bringing another intellectual perspective to my project and simply being a good mentor and supervisor. Through discussions with Vladimir Gel'man, my approach shifted more towards political science situating news processing within the context of political regimes and institutions. His incredible attention to every passage and statement in the text allowed me to hone my arguments and stay on point when I was torn apart being fascinated by different disciplines and approaches. His sensitivity and tact made this process a fantastic experience. My other two supervisors – Saara Ratilainen and Dmitry Yagodin – complemented Vladimir's expertise in political science with their deep understanding of media, context, and culture thus forming a perfect trio. I thank Dmitry Yagodin for forcing me to frame my theoretical and methodological approach more rigorously. Saara Ratilainen greatly compensated for my positivist spin by forcing me to think about the complexities of particular social and cultural contexts. I am also grateful for her thorough reading of the text, insightful feedback on argumentation and clarity, and just the opportunity to chat casually about anything while having a lunch or just stopping by her office.

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I am finishing this last section of the dissertation sitting in my office in the building of the School of Advanced Studies at the University of Tyumen. I am grateful to my colleagues who created a vibrant intellectual environment around me, filled with discussions about biology and medieval history, economics and computer science, historical sociology and neuroscience. I am especially grateful to Matvey Lomonosov and Krishna K for being wonderful colleagues. Matvey Lomonosov surrounded me with endless discussions about historical sociology and political science, nationalism and citizenship, and thousands of tiny details of the craft of research. Krishna K expanded my understanding of the brain, memory, and emotion, encouraged my growing interest in neuroscience, and deepened my understanding of the complexities of human mind. Moreover, they have also been good friends who used support, humor, and compassion to create a protective sphere around me which allowed me to withstand many difficulties. I also thank students for asking challenging questions and forcing me to form a more comprehensive understanding of relationships between media, politics, and society during my courses.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	14
1.1. EXPLAINING NEWS PROCESSING UNDER AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES	16
1.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS, METHODS, AND THE MAIN ARGUMENT	20
1.2. THE STRUCTURE OF THE WORK	26
CHAPTER I. RUSSIAN MEDIA AND POST-SOVIET CONTEXT	31
1.1. INTRODUCTION	31
1.2. THE RUSSIAN MEDIA MODEL	33
1.3. DIGITAL CHALLENGE	36
1.4. TELEVISION: GENRES, CONTENTS, AUDIENCES	38
1.5. NEW MEDIA AND THE GOVERNMENT: THE DIVIDED APPROACH	45
1.6. NEW MEDIA: GENRES, CONTENTS, AUDIENCES	50
1.7. AFTER 2014: THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT AND RUSSIAN MEDIA	56
1.8. THE LIMITS OF MEDIA CONTROL	58
1.9. CONCLUSION	60
CHAPTER II. MEDIA, PSYCHOLOGY, AND INSTITUTIONS	63
2.1. INTRODUCTION	63
2.2. MEDIA EFFECTS AND POLITICAL OPINIONS	64
2.2.1. A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF MEDIA EFFECTS RESEARCH	64
2.2.2. ACCESSIBILITY AND APPLICABILITY EFFECTS	66
2.2.3. THE ROLE OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT	73
2.3. NEWS PROCESSING AND COGNITIVE TOOLS	78
2.3.1. HEURISTICS AND CUES	78
2.3.2. THE ROLE OF POLITICAL AND MEDIA INSTITUTIONS	81
2.4. THE HIGH-CHOICE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT AND POLARIZATION	82
2.4.1. THREE TYPES OF POLARIZATION	82
2.4.2. THE ROLE OF MEDIA DIVERSITY	84
2.5. NEWS PROCESSING AND POLITICAL REGIMES	88
2.5.1. THE NATURE OF ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES	89
2.5.2. NEWS PROCESSING UNDER ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES	94
2.5.3. HEURISTICS AND CUES UNDER ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES	99

2.5.4. HIGH-CHOICE MEDIA ENVIRONMENTS UNDER ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES 103

CHAPTER III. RESEARCH DESIGN: THE ANALYSIS OF FOCUS GROUP DATA 108

3.1. A NOTE ON METHOD	108
3.2. FOCUS GROUP DESIGN, MATERIALS, RECRUITMENT	111
3.3. SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES, MEDIA CONSUMPTION, POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE	113
3.3. ETHICAL ISSUES	117

CHAPTER IV. TELEVISION AND POLITICAL OPINION UNDER AN ELECTORAL
AUTHORITARIAN REGIME 119

4.1. INTRODUCTION	119
4.2. DATA FROM FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS	121
4.2.1. POLITICALLY DISENGAGED: ACCESSIBILITY EFFECTS	121
4.2.2. POLITICALLY ENGAGED: APPLICABILITY EFFECTS	131
4.3. CONCLUSION	133

CHAPTER V. TELEVISION, HEURISTICS, AND MEDIA CREDIBILITY UNDER AN
ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIAN REGIME 138

5.1. INTRODUCTION	138
5.5. DATA FROM FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS	140
5.5.1. CREDIBILITY HEURISTICS	140
5.5.2. THE ROLE OF POLITICAL SOPHISTICATION	153
5.6. CONCLUSION	155

CHAPTER VI. HIGH-CHOICE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT AND FILTER BUBBLE EFFECT
UNDER AN ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIAN REGIME 160

6.1. INTRODUCTION	160
6.3. DATA FROM FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS	162
6.3.1. BROADCAST REPERTOIRE	164
6.3.2. BROADCAST-ORIENTED REPERTOIRE	165
6.3.3. DIGITAL-ORIENTED REPERTOIRE	168
6.4. CONCLUSION	171

<u>CHAPTER VII. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION</u>	<u>174</u>
7.1. SUMMARY OF THE MAIN ARGUMENT	174
7.2. NEWS PROCESSING UNDER AN ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIAN REGIME	177
7.3. LOW-INFORMATION RATIONALITY UNDER AN ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIAN REGIME	181
7.4. ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIAN REGIME IN THE HIGH-CHOICE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT	182
7.5. LIMITATIONS AND AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	184
7.6. POST-SCRIPTUM	190
<u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>	<u>193</u>
<u>APPENDICES</u>	<u>224</u>
APPENDIX A: AN EXAMPLE OF A NEWS STORY	224
APPENDIX B. FOCUS GROUP SCENARIO	227
APPENDIX C. SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AND NEWS CONSUMPTION	228
APPENDIX D. POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE	231

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

TABLE 1. RESEARCH ON NEWS PROCESSING IN RUSSIA.....	17
TABLE 2. RUSSIAN MEDIA HISTORY	34
TABLE 3. MOST POPULAR CONTENT, FALL 2019	44
TABLE 4. LEGAL RESTRICTIONS OF THE INTERNET IN RUSSIA	48
TABLE 5. TV VIEWERS' OPINIONS	131
TABLE 6 HEURISTICS, CUES, SOURCES	155
TABLE 7 TV VIEWERS' CROSS-MEDIA DIETS	164
FIGURE 1 GENRE BREAKDOWN (MEDIASCOPE, 2019A)	39
FIGURE 2 AVERAGE DURATION OF WATCHING (MEDIASCOPE, 2019A)	42
FIGURE 3 AUDIENCE FRAGMENTATION (MEDIASCOPE, 2019A)	43
FIGURE 4 CONTENT PREFERENCES BY AGE (MEDIASCOPE, 2019A)	44
FIGURE 5 FREEDOM HOUSE INTERNET SCORE	49
FIGURE 6 INTERNET USAGE (GFK RUSSIA, 2018)	51
FIGURE 7 INTERNET USAGE AND AGE (LEVADA CENTER, 2018; GFK RUSSIA, 2018)	51
FIGURE 8 DEVICES (GFK RUSSIA, 2018)	52
FIGURE 9 MOBILE ONLY (GFK RUSSIA, 2018).....	52
FIGURE 10 INTERNET AND INEQUALITY (MEDIASCOPE, 2019D)	53
FIGURE 11 INTERNET USAGE AND CITY SIZE (MEDIASCOPE, 2019D)	54
FIGURE 12 PREFERENCES FOR MEDIA CONTENT (YANDEX RADAR, 2019)	54
FIGURE 13 PREFERENCES FOR NEWS (YANDEX RADAR, 2019)	55
FIGURE 14 GENDER, AGE, EDUCATION	114
FIGURE 15 EMPLOYMENT AND PROFESSION	115
FIGURE 16 PREFERENCE FOR TV NEWS	115
FIGURE 17 INTERNET CONSUMPTION	116
FIGURE 18 POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE.....	117

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

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- II. "News Reception and Authoritarian Control in a Hybrid Media System: Russian TV Viewers and the Russia-Ukraine Conflict." *Politics* (forthcoming)

INTRODUCTION

Russia's biggest problem... The biggest Russia's problem is that there are so many problems, and information about them is so unclear, so that it is almost impossible to identify the biggest problem.

(From an interview with a TV viewer)

Russia is a TV nation. Describing post-Soviet society, Russian sociologist Boris Dubin describes “nearly total television [televizatsiia]” of leisure in Russia (Dubin, 2015). Although television is less popular among youngsters and the population of St. Petersburg and Moscow, it still dominates media consumption. According to the market agency Deloitte, 92% of Russians watch television at least once per two weeks (Deloitte, 2018). The popularity of television news varies around the world. For instance, according to the Pew Research Center, only 44% of Americans relied on television news in 2018 (Pew Research Center, 2018). According to the U.K. Office of Communications, almost 75% of British citizens relied on television news in 2019 (Ofcom, 2020). Russia is among the television-centric countries. According to scholars with Russian pollster Levada Center Volkov and Goncharov, 72% of Russians rely on television for the news, while 55% of Russians consider television news to be an objective source of information (Volkov & Goncharov, 2019).

This centrality of television in social and political life makes it a lucrative asset for the ruling elite. Since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2013, the Russian political regime's attempts to manipulate the public agenda have been particularly intense. Although even prior to the conflict, Russian TV was considered to be deviating from the ideals of objectivity and biased in favor of the Putin regime (e.g., Lipman, 2009), the Russia-Ukraine conflict has elevated these concerns to a new level. Mainstream Russian television news programs allocated a third of their time to the conflict and can be characterized as inaccurate, lacking balance, and biased in favor of the regime's version of the conflict (“Messages of Russian TV”, 2015). Russian TV has been accused of using Soviet-style techniques of propaganda (Paul & Matthews, 2016), confusion and disinformation (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014), and outright fake news (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016). Russian media describe the conflict as a war, the Donbass rebels are sympathetically called “people's militia” and

portrayed as a defense against the punishers from Kiev who are identified as a fascist threat spreading in Ukraine (Hansen, 2015). The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is framed as the struggle between Russian values and the West within Ukraine. The West is as framed as a threat and strongly demonized (Nygren et al., 2018). To complement television news, the regime has been attempting to instrumentalize other types of media spreading similar messages across social media (Stukal et al., 2017; Suslov, 2014) and attempting to control news aggregators and search engines (Daucé, 2017; Sivetc, 2019).

These policies and techniques of control do not make Russian media sphere completely homogeneous or perfectly aligned with the narratives propagated by the regime. Journalists working for both state-controlled television channels (Schimpfossil & Yablokov, 2014) and state-controlled media (Tolz et al., 2020) can enjoy a significant degree of autonomy in covering social and political issues depending on the nature of the topic, audience, and particular context. However, the diversity of media content in Russia decreases proportionally with the increasing political nature and sensitivity of the topic. As Oates points out, “There are three key points necessary to understand about the Russian media: There is a large amount of media diversity except on key political topics; the vast majority of the media do not challenge the state on these key political topics; and Russian audience members are enthusiastic consumers of media content. Thus, there is an appearance of media diversity, but little meaningful challenge to the regime” (Oates, 2006, p. 402).

In this context, it is not surprising that scholars agree that Russian TV news greatly affects domestic audiences. While the fact that “national TV effectively shapes public opinion by boosting, playing down or ignoring any figure or event” (Lipman, 2009, para. 27) was widely assumed before the Russia-Ukraine conflict, after 2014 this assumption had become even more entrenched. As Schimpfossil and Yablokov argue, “television is the primary, and most effective, tool employed by the political regime to influence its people, and the federal television networks are critical elements of the political system in Putin’s Russia” (Schimpfossil & Yablokov, 2014, p. 296). Similarly, Gerber and Zavisca claim that “the Russia government’s efforts to promote its particular narrative about geopolitical issues and alternative sociopolitical models have enjoyed some success” (Gerber & Zavisca, 2016, p. 95). Khaldarova and Pantti found that “the aggressive media campaign has been effective in that approximately 70 per cent of Russian viewers believe that the events in Ukraine are covered by the

government-owned channels truthfully and without bias” (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016, p. 892). Some scholars argue that television is effective in manipulating public opinion due to limited access to other sources of information (Volkov, 2015). Other scholars claim that Russian TV reporting plays into the “the sense of frustration over losing the Cold War, and Russia’s uncertainty over its new identity” (Lipman, 2016, para. 30).

However, the assumptions about significant and linear media influence are problematic for several reasons. Some of these reasons are Russia-specific. Specifically, there is a shortage of research on news processing in Russia. The more authoritative accounts of how audiences make sense of the news are partly outdated and belong to the 2000s. Some of these reasons are characteristic of the research on news processing under authoritarian regimes in general. While existing studies have yielded rich results regarding the effects of state-controlled media on citizens in authoritarian contexts, scholars diverge in their estimations of how much capacity and inclination citizens have to interpret news critically under authoritarian regimes. In addition, most often than not these accounts do not take into account the complexity of contemporary media environments where online sources crucially mediate the influence of television. This study addresses these issues and contributes to the understanding of news processing in both contemporary Russia and other electoral authoritarian regimes.

The first two goals of this study focus on elaborating more nuanced and up-to-date theoretical apparatus for the study of Russian TV viewers. This study engages with political communication, psychology, and political science to explain the process of news processing in Russia. The last two goals of this study focus on using Russia as a case study to address some of the gaps in the research on news processing in electoral authoritarian regimes. Since Putin’s regime shares many common elements with other electoral authoritarian regimes, this study puts news processing in contemporary Russia in a broader context of political regimes and attempts to use Russia as a case study to enrich the current knowledge about news processing in other electoral authoritarian regimes.

1.1. Explaining News Processing Under Authoritarian Regimes

The first and foremost goal of this dissertation is to see how TV viewers make sense of the news in contemporary Russia and to contribute to a theoretically rich but small

field – the research on news processing in Russia. The assumptions about linear media influence are mostly shared by scholars who focus on the content, production, and political and economic context around media rather than investigate the process of understanding the news. The content, production, political and economic context around the media in Russia is a saturated field which has generated a great deal of research in the past 20 years (e.g., Androunas, 1993; Kiria & Degtereva, 2010; Kiriya, 2018; Koltsova, 2006; Lipman, 2009; Lipman & McFaul, 2001; Mickiewicz, 1999; Nygren et al., 2018; Oates, 2014; Oates & Lokot, 2013; Rulyova, 2007; Strukov & Zvereva, 2014; Vartanova, 2011; Vartanova & Smirnov, 2010; Vartanova et al., 2016; Zassoursky, 2002). While the influence of the media is routinely assumed in these studies, it requires separate analysis. Analysis of the audience and media effects in contemporary Russia is rare. Few scholars have tried to address this issue for the past twenty years - most of them before crucial changes in the Russian media sphere in 2013-14 years related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, such as increased government pressure on media organizations and heightened anti-Western rhetoric in the news.

Quantitative		Qualitative	
	Project		Project
1999	Enikolopov et al. (2011)	2000	Oates (2006)
2001	White & Oates (2003)	2002	Mickiewicz (2005; 2008)
2009	Rosenfeld (2018)	2006	Hutchings & Rulyova (2009)
2014	Stoycheff & Nisbet (2016)	2011	Toepfl (2013; 2014)
2014	Szostek (2017a)	2014	Szostek (2018)
2016	Savin et al. (2018)		
2016	Sirotkina & Zavadskaya (2020)		
2019	Shirikov (2021)		

Table 1. Research on News Processing in Russia

As of 2021, eight quantitative research projects had addressed the issue of media effects and news processing in Russia, five of them after the start of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. In fact, only five of them focus on news processing as such. However, I also count the work of Rosenfeld (2018), Stoycheff and Nisbet (2016), and Sirotkina & Zavadskaya (2020) as research on news processing because these projects touch on psychological mechanisms underlining news processing. Five qualitative research projects addressed the issue of news processing in Russia, only one of them after the start of Russia-Ukraine conflict. As Mickiewicz eloquently puts it, “When almost an entire population depends on television for its news (...) the other side of the television screen – the one where the viewers are arrayed – is invisible” (Mickiewicz, 2008, p. 1).

Made a decade ago, this claim largely holds true today. While explaining this gap would require a separate piece of research, there seem to be two important factors which explain this blind spot. Although empirical social science gained prominence in several reputable Russian research centers in recent decades, Russia still does not have an established tradition of empirical social science across the country. This tendency is common for the countries where social science research has been introduced only recently. Much like Chinese communication scholars (Luo, 2013), Russian scholars work in a non-empirical way more often than not. This lack of empirical social science research is partly explained by the Soviet legacy. Mass surveys began to appear in the Soviet Union only in the 1960s. In addition, they were primarily based on ideological conceptions of the reader and the citizen (Lovell, 2000) and considered to be a tool to monitor the effectiveness of ideological work rather than to investigate audiences or public opinion (Slider, 1985).

Finally, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has become an important tipping point which surprisingly, has put the empirical research on how citizens make sense of the news in even less favorable position. While one could expect that the intensity and complexity of the conflict would generate more in-depth analysis, instead it reinvigorated some older concepts, such as a linear model of media influence. While this concept was discredited in social sciences long ago, after the start of the conflict “it lives on in another world altogether, where social media blogs, comments, and advertisement as well as press reportage are thought to produce a deep, immediate, and lasting effect on the whole population exposed to it” (Mickiewicz, 2019, p.101). If one assumes that media have immediate, deep, and long-lasting effect on the population, in-depth analysis of news processing is redundant.

The second goal of this dissertation is to address the issue of news processing in a partly new environment. Most studies of news processing in Russia were conducted before the turning point of Russia-Ukraine conflict. Two factors are important here. First, it is media diversity. The previous studies capture the moments of relative media diversity (e.g., Mickiewicz, 2008; Oates, 2006). Since then, the freedom of the press in Russia has been plummeting as a result of the regime’s takeovers and constraining of the press. According to Freedom House’s expert rating, the freedom of the press in Russia decreased from 60 in 2002 to 83 in 2017 on the scale from 0 (best) to 100 (worst). It Russia on par with full-fledged authoritarianisms, such as Belarus (83) or Saudi Arabia (86) (Freedom House, 2002; 2017). Similarly,

Russia's rating of Internet freedom has decreased from 51 ("partly free") in 2009 to 30 ("not free") in 2020 which places Russia on par with a number of authoritarian regimes, such as Kazakhstan (32), Sudan (30), UAE (29) (Freedom House, 2009; 2020). Second, the scale of social and political turbulence before the Ukraine-Russia conflict pale in comparison to a nearly full-scale war in the neighboring country which started in 2014. While TV viewers analyzed by scholars in the 2000s witnessed terrorism (e.g., the Beslan school hostage crisis) and protests (e.g., 2005 protests against the replacement of benefit allowances with direct payments; 2011-12 post-electoral mobilization) and other dramatic episodic events, the intensity and duration of these events do not come close to the coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict¹. As Khaldarova and Pantti put it, "The Ukrainian crisis has triggered claims that Russia has raised the information war to a new level" (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016, p. 1).

The third goal of this dissertation is to use Russian TV viewers' understanding of the news about the Russia-Ukraine conflict as a case study to enrich the current knowledge about news processing in electoral authoritarian regimes. While existing studies have yielded rich results regarding the effects of state-controlled media on citizens under authoritarian regimes, scholars have mostly focused on how, why, and under what conditions citizens trust or distrust news (e.g., Geddes and Zaller, 1989; Moehler & Singh, 2011; Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011; Truex, 2016; Ursin, 2017). However, the influence of political engagement - a factor which crucially determines how citizens make sense of news (Lodge & Hamil, 1986; Zaller, 1992) - on news processing has largely been outside the scope of analysis. It is not surprising that scholars diverge in their estimations of how much capacity and inclination citizens have to interpret news critically under authoritarian regimes. Several studies indirectly suggest the low degree of political engagement is a crucial factor which explains the nature of news processing in authoritarian contexts (Meyen & Schwer, 2007; Leeson, 2008; Mickiewicz, 2008; Zhang, 2012; Toepfl, 2013; Savin et al., 2018). There is a need for a new approach which would help to factor political engagement in analysis

¹ Other major turbulence which should be mentioned here is the war in Chechnya. However, I am not aware of any studies fully focusing on the processing the news about the war in Chechnya by TV viewers. Oates (2006) pays some attention to the reactions of TV viewers to the war in Chechnya. Yet, she does not investigate how TV viewers make sense of the news about the war, and the topic itself receives only scant attention in her study.

to suggest a more comprehensive explanation for the nature of news processing in authoritarian contexts.

Finally, the fourth goal of this dissertation is to address the issue of news processing under an electoral authoritarian regime by considering highly saturated information environments which include both television and a variety of new media, such as online news outlets, social media, and news aggregators. Contemporary scholarship on media consumption demonstrates that people form mixed news repertoires which include various media, such as broadcasting television and online sources (e.g., Bos et al., 2016; Edgerly, 2015; Lee & Yang, 2014). The influence of broadcasting television in contemporary media environments is crucially mediated by online sources. In the context of nearly total digitalization of the population, it is impossible to understand TV viewers' understanding of television news without taking into account the ways it is intertwined with digital environments. Going beyond the offline/online distinction and investigating the combined effect of television news and online media is a crucial task for understanding media environments under authoritarian regimes which employ intricate persuasion strategies engaging both television and new media (Oates, 2014).

1.2. Research Questions, Methods, and the Main Argument

In the context of the scarcity of and partly outdated status of the research on news processing in Russia, the unclear role of political engagement in news processing under authoritarian regimes in general, and the growing importance of the Internet in addition to broadcasting and other forms of media, there is an urgent need for new research. To address these gaps, in this dissertation I have asked the following research question: How do citizens make sense of TV news under an electoral authoritarian regime? The secondary research questions are: 1) How do citizens form opinions based on information from TV news under an electoral authoritarian regime? 2) How do citizens evaluate the credibility of TV news under an electoral authoritarian regime? 3) How does the combination of TV news and online news affect citizens' opinions about politics an electoral authoritarian regime? This study uses Russian TV viewers' understanding of the news about the Russia-Ukraine conflict to address these questions.

Unlike the bulk of research on news processing under authoritarian regimes, I have relied on political communication and political psychology to address these questions. It is difficult to locate the disciplinary affiliation of this study unambiguously. Political communication and political psychology are themselves interdisciplinary fields. When it comes to news processing, political communication and political psychology are informed by the concepts borrowed from social psychology, and social psychology itself is shaped by cognitive psychology. At the same time, political communication and political psychology are often considered to be branches of political science. As a result, theoretical assumptions existing across these interdisciplinary fields rather than these fields themselves are better markers for locating this study. The first assumption existing across these fields is that human cognition acts as an *information processing system*. Just like a computer, it encodes new information, stores it in internal memory structures, and then retrieves it to use as a framework for encoding new information (McGraw, 2000). The second assumption existing across these fields is the Herbert A. Simon's modified version of rational choice theory which posits that human cognition is governed by *bounded rationality* (Simon, 1955; 1979). Just like an economic agent, it deploys mental resources strategically² depending on tractability of the problem, available resources, constraints, and expected outcomes. Hence computer jargon: information processing, memory, schemas, and heuristics.

Following landmark studies by Doris A. Graber (1984; 2001), I refer to the process of making sense of the news as news processing. Similar to information processing, processing news is a cycle of acquiring and encoding information from the news, integrating it with prior knowledge, and applying prior knowledge to process new information. The alternative terms are interpretation, perception, and reception. Interpretation is too general a term. Perception emphasizes perceptive rather than cognitive aspects of the process of making sense of the news. Reception is tightly connected with the wave of research on audience reception within humanities and cultural studies which followed the inception of British cultural studies and Hall's (1973) famous "encoding/decoding" paradigm. While this tradition provides deep insights into the process of interpretation of media messages by audiences, it emphasizes

² Strategy and rationality in this case are not equal to deliberate intentions. Rather, they are understood to be adaptive strategies of human cognition and may as well be semi-automatic or automatic.

audiences' active choices in producing meanings. Instead, news processing puts emphasis on psychological mechanisms which underline the process of learning from the news.

To address the research questions, I conducted focus group interviews and considered how Russian TV viewers process the news about the Russia-Ukraine conflict and form opinions about politics. In the context of psychology-driven theoretical framework, the focus group method can seem to be a strange choice. Yet, the flexibility of group discussions and their quasi-experimental structure when many groups of participants are exposed to the same sequence of video materials has made the focus group a popular method of choice for many scholars of political communication (e.g., Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994; Kern & Just, 1995; Mickiewicz, 2008). This study relies on eight focus groups conducted in St. Petersburg in 2016 and in Moscow in 2017 and structured around the viewing of three news episodes about the Russia-Ukraine conflict from *Channel One*. The news reports focus on the Maidan protests in Ukraine in Fall 2013, the referenda in the Eastern Ukraine in Spring 2014, and the military confrontation in the Eastern Ukraine in Summer 2014. In addition to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, I discussed a broad array of topics with participants, such as Russian and international politics, domestic economy, everyday life concerns, and practices of media consumption. The focus group discussions were supplemented with questionnaires focusing on participants' socio-economic status, media consumption, and political knowledge.

Poets and writers can provide deep insights into motives, emotions, and psychological mechanisms. Vladimir Vysotsky's *Dialog in Front of TV*³ (1973), a song which was probably familiar to many of my focus group participants, can briefly summarize my main argument. Vladimir Vysotsky is often considered to be a mirror and encyclopedia of the Soviet society. *Dialog in Front of TV* is a perfect illustration of his critical commentary. It juxtaposes two realms of reality: a bright reality of circus and the reality of everyday life of a Soviet family. It depicts a married couple - Zina and Ivan - watching a circus performance on TV. Zina is empathetic and agitated. Being attracted by the salient features of the performance, she immediately comments on

³The song is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PO8MY0Vj-MU>; a short video excerpt from Vysotsky's live concert featuring a part of this song is also available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PO8MY0Vj-MU>

them trying to engage her husband in a conversation and draws all sorts of familiar parallels. One clown reminds her of her boss. Another one looks like her husband's heavily drinking brother-in-law. The third one wears a mini skirt which she immediately asks her husband to buy. Ivan is angry and defensive. He tries to deflect all her comments and requests that refer to the harsh work conditions and tiredness. He even reminds Zina about the complaint regarding family issues she sent to his workplace provoking Ivan's salary cut. Discussing the circus performance, they get distracted by familiar parallels and go into detail about the modest conditions of their family life only to return to the circus performance later. Vysotsky portrays people whose thinking and feelings are made of contradictions. Being skeptical about the Soviet Union, Zina and Ivan are part and parcel of it. They mix established Soviet clichés with implicit and explicit criticism of the Soviet system. While Ivan and Zina live in the world of ideology, they are interested in family, career, and other more down-to-earth issues rather than politics. As a result, their criticisms are simply reflected in their consciousness forming incoherent ensembles rather than coherent articulated visions.

If the circus is replaced with politics on TV, this song is an accurate representation of my argument. It can be read as a criticism of the TV viewer. A man and a woman in the song are glued to the TV and return to it after each round of the discussion. However significant the problems they discuss are, they still return to the magical image. It can be read as an apologetics of the viewer. The TV image works only as a starting point making them discuss daily problems and ironically criticize TV. They hardly succumb to the power of the magical image and make a critical reading of it. I offer a psychological reading of this song. When TV viewers are engaged with politics on a routine basis, they elaborate a coherent worldview which allows them to criticize or approve of TV reporting on politics and the government's policies. However, when they do not consider engaging with TV news as a meaningful activity, they are neither fully critical of the TV image nor fully enchanted by it. Rather, depending on particular associations and memories, they can hold both attitudes without integrating them in a coherent attitude.

In essence, I argue that TV viewers under electoral authoritarian regimes are much like Ivan and Zina. Although Putin's regime has been relying on the "rally around the flag effect" for some time (Sirotkina & Zavadskaya, 2020), electoral authoritarian regimes tend to rely on demobilization rather than mobilization (Linz 2000; McAllister & White, 2017; Robertson, 2011). In addition, a wide variety of factors associated with

authoritarian rule, such as constrained media freedom (Leeson, 2008), electoral corruption (Kostadionva, 2009; Martinez i Coma & Trinh, 2016; Simpser, 2012; Stockemer et al., 2012), and absence of competitiveness in elections (Croke et al., 2015; Frantz, 2018; McAllister & White, 2008; Turovsky & Korneeva, 2018), make political engagement seem a less meaningful activity and decrease the incentives for citizens to engage in politics. Relying on restricted political participation, electoral authoritarian regimes secure the fragile equilibrium between various elites, international community, and dissatisfied populations.

When political participation, elections, and media are constrained, citizens understand that acquiring political knowledge can hardly influence elites' decisions and they rationally choose to invest in other activities which have more tangible outcomes. Ordinary citizens find it difficult to learn the complexities of politics due to both limitations of their cognitive apparatuses and relatively low priority they assign to public affairs compared to other matters, such as families, jobs, and daily lives (Graber, 2001). To borrow some of Anthony Downs' insights (1957), those citizens are rationally ignorant: their rationality consists in minimizing the effort invested in learning and processing information. Thus, they acquire information only when its benefits outweigh the cost of learning it. Rational ignorance under electoral authoritarian regimes translates into learning from the news in a peculiar way. Being politically disengaged, citizens have no incentives to learn about politics and form coherent political opinions. At the same time, they are bombarded with astonishing amounts of information. As a result, their opinions are incoherent. They are susceptible to the TV influence. They are enchanted by the TV image, emotionally react to it, and borrow the TV lens for the interpretation of public affairs because they do not have consistent political worldviews. Yet, for the same reason, they cannot assimilate the TV lens and shrug off TV influence easily. It is being drowned in the discussions of mundane problems and implicit criticisms.

Specifically, electoral authoritarian regimes affect several prerequisites which are essential for citizens' engagement with politics. Only small minorities of citizens lean towards politics and are ready to invest energy in searching for and analyzing information no matter what. Most citizens need *incentives* to acquire political information – the perception that political learning can have tangible effects (Downs, 1957); *cognitive tools* to help them navigate political information - the opinions of politicians, parties, and media organizations which are considered to be credible and

authoritative (Popkin, 1994); and *opportunities* to acquire easily accessible information in mainstream media outlets (Prior, 2007). While scholars generally lament the lack of political knowledge in democratic countries, and these prerequisites vary depending particular on institutional settings in democracies, authoritarian regimes put these prerequisites into question in a more serious way. Under electoral authoritarian regimes, the incentives to engage with politics are extremely weak (citizens do not feel that acquiring political knowledge can have tangible effects), opportunities to acquire political knowledge are constrained (citizens are not satisfied with the quality and credibility of state-run television but are not ready to spend time and energy looking for and analyzing alternative sources), and heuristics provided by the political environment are not considered to be reliable (citizens do not consider parties or politicians to be independent institutions whose opinions are authoritative enough to be relied on).

The dissertation uses this nexus between news processing, political engagement, and political regime as a heuristic and looks through its lens at three different domains of news processing under an electoral authoritarian regime. First, I used this lens to understand better how TV viewers make sense of the news and form opinions with special focus on political engagement or incentives to acquire political information. I rely on the assumption that citizens under an electoral authoritarian regime do not have enough incentives to acquire political information. At the same time, they live in an information-rich environment and are being bombarded with an astonishing amount of information. I argue that these processes result in a specific type of news processing. Dealing with large amounts of political information the best they can, TV viewers process the news by mobilizing the most accessible considerations. As a result, their opinions contain both critical and supportive reactions about the media and the regime.

Second, I use this lens to investigate the cognitive heuristics used by TV viewers to evaluate credibility of the news. I rely on the assumption that citizens under an electoral authoritarian regime do not media and political institutions as independent and authoritative. I argue that this distrust results in a specific type of evaluation of political information. When the political and media environment does not provide tools that are useful for evaluating political information, TV viewers rely on other tools which seem more reliable, such as common sense and cultural stereotypes.

Finally, I use this lens to investigate the cross-media repertoires of TV viewers which include a variety of media sources, both offline and online, with special focus on opportunities to acquire political information. As electoral authoritarian regimes transitioned to high-choice media environments where abundant online sources are available, such regimes often use intricate persuasion strategies attempting to control many media at the same time. I argue that for less politically active participants, this strategy may result in the orchestrated filter bubble effect as they find similar and consistent information from many sources. The investigation of these three domains – making sense of TV news, evaluating the credibility of TV news, and combining television with online media – has allowed me to build a stereoscopic, complex, and holistic view of news processing in Russia and to enrich the understanding of news processing under electoral authoritarian regimes.

1.2. The Structure of the Work

This section details how this argument is developed throughout the dissertation. To explain how this dissertation works as a coherent logical whole, I outline the structure of the work and briefly describe functions, main ideas, and findings of each chapter.

Chapter I sets the stage for further investigation of the Russian TV viewers and their processing of the news about the Russia-Ukraine conflict by paying attention to the media environment around them. The purpose of this chapter is to contextualize the process of news processing by highlighting key tendencies which shape the news in particular, and media content in Russia in general. I argue that the structure of the contemporary Russian media landscape is a product of several consecutive waves of glocalization or “the simultaneity and the inter-penetration of [...] the global and the local” (Robertson, 1995, p. 30). The first wave of glocalization included the introduction of market-based ownership structures in the 1990s. These structures were included in various oligarchic pyramids leading to the formation of the statist media model. The second wave of glocalization included the introduction of digital television. While digitalization was supposed to democratize and diversify broadcasting, controlling nationwide multiplexes, the regime could selectively digitalize preferred channels while filtering unwanted ones. The third wave of glocalization included the regime’s managing of the growing spread of the Internet. After the 2011-12 post-electoral protest, the regime recognized the Internet as both a resource and a threat and took

the divided approach toward it. While embracing its potential and facilitating its development for economic purposes, the government took a hard line over its political regulation and started to use it as an instrument to compete in both domestic and international information spaces. However, the presence of some independent media, the increased role of new media in political and social life, and tight integration with the global communication and media market still prevent the Russian media sphere from complete homogenization and fully aligning with regime's narratives. By analyzing the structure and the evolution of the contemporary Russian media environment, this chapter describes entertainment and political media content which a regular TV viewer typically encounters in Russia.

Chapter II introduces the theoretical framework of the dissertation by reviewing the relevant literature in political communication, cognitive and political psychology, and research on news processing under authoritarian regimes. By reviewing findings across several fields and disciplines, I construct the theoretical lens essential for understanding news processing in Russia and identify gaps and issues in the literature on news processing under electoral authoritarian regimes. In this chapter, I consider three major issues in political communication: media effects, heuristics and cues, and high-choice media environments. Discussing communicative, psychological, and political aspects of media effects, cognitive heuristics for processing political information, and polarization in high-choice media environments, I use this theoretical lens to look at these same processes in under an electoral authoritarian regime. I show how all these three elements can vary depending on different institutional environments. These three bodies of literature (media effects, heuristics, high-choice media environments) serve as the theoretical frameworks for three respective empirical chapters which focus on how people form political opinions based on news, use heuristics to make sense of news, and use a variety of media in a high-choice media environment under an electoral authoritarian regime.

Chapter III outlines the research design of the study. After describing the Russian media environment and calibrating the theoretical lens for understanding news processing both in Russia and other authoritarian contexts, in this chapter I provide descriptions of methods for the analysis of empirical results and answering research questions. In this chapter, I provide a detailed description of methods, data, and materials used in answering the research questions. In particular, I critically reflect on the focus group as a method, its advantages and shortcomings, and explain why

this method is especially valuable for the research on news processing. I explain the organizational details of the study, the design of questionnaires and scenarios for focus groups, the structure of focus groups themselves, and the description of news episodes screened during focus group discussions. Finally, this chapter ends by providing detailed information about characteristics which are thought to impact on political information processing. The description includes socio-demographic profiles of participants, media diets, and the level of political knowledge.

Chapter IV demonstrates how Russian TV viewers make sense of the news with special focus on motivation to acquire political information. I provide a detailed account of how participants express different opinions responding to TV news. A politicized minority of focus groups participants are more interested in politics, have coherent political schemas, and demonstrate applicability effect. They filter and reinterpret incoming information through their already established views demonstrating the signs of consistency bias. The less politicized majority do not have motivation to engage with politics. As a result, they do not have coherent political schemas and demonstrate the accessibility effect. They use the more accessible ideas to interpret incoming messages. I use these results to contribute to several fields. On one hand, these findings allow me to develop a new theoretical lens for more nuanced understanding of news processing in Russia. While some scholars acknowledge the role of political engagement in news processing in Russia, this study goes further by showing how political engagement determines news processing by comparing politically engaged and disengaged TV viewers. On the other hand, this argument allows me to contribute to the literature on news processing under electoral authoritarian regimes. While electoral authoritarian regimes can vary from less to more mobilizational types, in general they tend to offer fewer incentives for political engagement. This study allows me to clarify some of the psychological correlates of this situation. This type of news processing supports authoritarian survival. While citizens might be dissatisfied with the life under authoritarian regimes, they do not have incentives to substantively process political information and do not challenge, rather than genuinely support, authoritarian equilibrium due to being unable to articulate consistent opinions.

Chapter V focuses on the process of evaluation of credibility of TV news with special focus on the heuristics used by TV viewers. This chapter seeks to contribute to a wider and largely unaddressed issue in scholarly debates: the functioning of low-

information rationality outside of democracies. In this chapter, I document heuristics used by TV viewers to evaluate credibility of TV news, the content and sources of these heuristics, and particular cues which trigger them. Scholars report that citizens in democracies rely on a variety of heuristics based on the institutional and political environment, such as party agendas, ideologies, opinions of politicians and experts, and reputation of media organizations. My findings show that citizens cannot entrust them with the job of interpreting public affairs under an electoral authoritarian regime because they are not considered as independent and authoritative. Adapting to an authoritarian environment in which political and media institutions enjoy little trust, they rely on other tools which are drawn primarily from daily life, such as common sense and cultural stereotypes. These tools seem more reliable in the context of compromised institutions. In addition, these findings allow me to explain the effect of profound distrust in media on news processing under authoritarian regimes identified in previous research. I show that while citizens can be skeptical about the media, there is a gulf between reported critical attitude to the media and the psychological machinery which is at work when TV viewers are asked to evaluate specific elements of news broadcasts.

Chapter VI explores cross-media repertoires of TV viewers with special focus on opportunities to acquire political information. This chapter seeks to detail news processing under an electoral authoritarian regime by placing it within the context of the discussion on high-choice media environments. In this chapter, I detail TV viewers' cross-media repertoires which include both television and a variety of online sources, such as social media and news aggregators, and show how these combinations affect news processing. Since Russian state attempts to control several types of media at the same time, I find that less politically active participants have the impression that information in different sources is consistent and similar. This similarity allows them to conclude that TV news is credible. These findings both illuminate the effects of the regime's strategy of controlling multiple media in the high-choice media environment and show how the proliferation of sources of information can affect political communication differently depending on specific political and institutional factors. The tendency to form personalized algorithmic filter bubbles in market-based media systems in democracies is underlined by the complex interaction between citizens' preferences and algorithm-assisted filtering of media content. I show that under an electoral authoritarian regime, concerted and direct pressure over many media leads

to the orchestrated filter bubble effect. Unlike filter bubbles based on algorithms and personalization, this orchestrated filter bubble effect is imposed in a top-down fashion by the state and used to reinforce the messages of the state-controlled television rather than citizens' individual preferences.

Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main argument, reintegrates the theoretical framework of the study with findings, and explains the contributions of this dissertation to various fields. It explains how this study helps us to understand the process of news processing in Russia and under electoral authoritarian regimes better, and ties together all separate aspects of this process addressed throughout the work: the process of making sense and forming opinions based on TV news and motivation to obtain political information, the heuristics used to deal with news and political information, the combined effect of television news and different online media in the high-choice media environment. In addition, the conclusion critically discusses essential topics and issues which the study could not address and formulates them as avenues for further research. Last but not least, the conclusion uses the results of this study as a vantage point to provide research-informed reflection on the current status of Russian media, politics, and citizenry.

CHAPTER I. RUSSIAN MEDIA AND POST-SOVIET CONTEXT

1.1. Introduction

The process of news processing ultimately depends on the type of content audiences are supplied with. In turn, the content audiences are supplied with depends on broader political, economic, and technological context shaping the process of news production. The purpose of this chapter is to set the stage for further investigation of Russian TV viewers and the processing of news about the Russia-Ukraine conflict by surveying the media environment around them. By highlighting key tendencies which shape news and media content in Russia, this chapter demonstrates the full spectrum of media content which the Russian TV viewer encounters while navigating Russian media landscape and portrays the audiences who consume this content.

This chapter surveys the structural features which characterize the post-Soviet Russian media environment. Two factors are the most important for the understanding of contemporary Russian media environment: its political economy and technological development. In terms of both political economy and technological development, Russian media environment is an illustrative example of what sociologists call glocalization. Rethinking the concept of globalization, Roland Robertson defines it as “the simultaneity and the inter-penetration of what are conventionally called the global and the local, or - in more general vein - the universal and the particular” (Robertson, 1995, p. 30). Being determined by the Soviet historical legacy and specificity of the Russian political and economic environment, Russian media are also shaped by global trends, such as market economy and new communication technologies. Vice versa, being situated in a particular Russian context, market economy and new communication technologies are being reshaped by the post-Soviet historical legacy and peculiarities of the Russian political and economic environment. This chapter traces these intersections of global and local in a variety of contexts, such as turbulent history of Russian media, the development and digitalization of Russian television, and the development of the Internet. Relying on the concept of glocalization, it shows how these intersections affect both the evolution of television and digital content encountered by the TV viewer and practices and preferences of the audiences.

Based on the analysis of structural tendencies shaping the post-Soviet Russian media environment, this chapter explains the evolution of both television and digital

content encountered by the TV viewer. I show that the overlapping of global economic and technological trends with local political and economic circumstances led to the formation of an uneven media environment accommodating contradictory tendencies. While it is entertainment-oriented, it is also used for propaganda purposes. The regime's narratives are present in both news and non-news entertainment content, such as talk shows, TV series, movies, and cultural content. At the same time, these narratives are being redefined due to more active digital audiences and pressures of global communication and media market. While being extremely biased and anti-Western in terms of its contents, Russian television is Western in terms of its genres. Both entertainment and news are strongly reliant on Western formats. While being actively co-opted by the regime, digital media still provide access to all points of view and information which can be found at will. However, one has to possess considerable interest and knowledge to make sense of this enormous amount of information.

Finally, the chapter portrays the audiences who consume this content in terms of their demographic characteristics, media practices, and preferences for content. While television audiences have been undergoing the process of fragmentation based on preference-based fragmentation similar to other countries with high-choice media environments (Prior, 2007), central television channels still remain dominant. They supply TV viewers with political information either in the form of highly popular news or incorporating politics in non-news entertainment formats. Similarly, while digital audiences strongly gravitate towards entertainment, a number of online news outlets and news aggregators still attract the second-largest number of visitors after ubiquitous social media. Provided that the absolute majority of Russians rely on both television and digital media, these patterns are likely to overlap. People receive information from both television and digital media at the same time. In sum, while the media market is entertainment-oriented and has been undergoing fragmentation to satisfy audiences' preferences, state-aligned channels and online media are still dominant in this market. It is unlikely that one can fully escape from political information and the official political narratives. These patterns provide an important background for further investigation of news processing of Russian TV viewers.

The chapter has the following structure. First, I describe the main stages of the development and the structure of Russian media model which combines commercial orientation and state control. Second, I describe the digitalization of Russian television which followed global communication trends and was adjusted to Russian political

reality in a specific way. Finally, I describe genres and contents of television which result from these tendencies and the preferences of the audiences who consume this content. Since the influence of television in contemporary media environments is crucially mediated by the digital media, I describe the main stages of the development and the structure of Russian online sphere, genres and contents of digital media, and the preferences of the audiences who consume this content. In addition, I survey the changes in Russian media landscape since the start of Russia-Ukraine conflict. Finally, I conclude the chapter by summarizing the main features of television and digital content and the structure of the audiences to provide more general background for further investigation of news processing of Russian TV viewers.

1.2. The Russian Media Model

One dimension of glocalization in the Russian media environment is its political economy. Namely, it is the installation of the market-based media model in the context of political and economic structures which remained after the collapse of the Soviet Union. These changes in the media environment coincide with more general transformations of the society in the 1990s, a large-scale privatization program which allowed for the emergence of small groups of political and economic elites, or oligarchic clans, to gain valuable state assets at low costs. This large-scale privatization led to frequent changes in the patterns of media ownership, the use of media as instruments in political, economic, and personal struggles, and media organizations' dire economic position resulting in constant maneuvering between bankruptcy and co-optation. All these circumstances are well described by the term "media in transition" (Androunas, 1993). Scholars offer slightly different political and economic periodizations of the Russian media history which result from this intersection of local and global patterns. Yet, they are organized approximately along the same lines.

1970-1985	The Soviet Period	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The soviet centralized system of control; media are mouthpieces of various party structures serving the Leninist purposes of "propaganda, agitation, and organization" (McNair, 1991);
1985-1990	The Glasnost Period	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gradual political liberalization of the press;
1990-1991		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The press is still subsidized by the government, but journalists are allowed full freedom of expression; The new media law №2124-1 provides a legal framework for the independence of the

	<p>“The “golden age” of the Russian press” (Zassurskii, 2004, p. 24);</p> <p>A period of “freedom without responsibility” (McCormack, 2002);</p>	<p>media from the state. Censorship is banned by the constitution;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The growing prestige of the journalistic profession; • Journalists strongly deviate from the idea of disinterested reporting and instead assume the role of “spiritual leaders” trying to “enlighten, agitate, and organize in the name of true values and ideals” (Zassoursky, 2002, p. 11-12);
1992-1995	Economic collapse of the press	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liberalization of prices in 1992; • Economic collapse of most media organizations included in the wide network of the Soviet media system: most of them go bankrupt (Koltsova, 2006, p. 36); • Media organizations’ financial unsustainability and elites’ view of media as lucrative resources turn media environment into a battlefield where media are acquired and used to discredit opponents and advance political and business interests;
1996-2000	Sponsorship and media empires	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In order to survive, media organizations have to seek sponsorship; • Sponsorship leads to the formation of “media empires” (McCormack, 2002); • This period culminates in 1996 when media organizations are used by the alliance of president Yeltsin and oligarchs to win otherwise lost election (Oates, 2006);
2000 +	Centralization of power and takeover of independent media by the state	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Putin eliminates all alternative centers of power. Transition from the “competing pyramid” system of power to the “single-pyramid” system of power (Hale, 2010); • The takeover of most influential independent media by the state (Lipman, 2009); • Selective application of financial law to media oligarchs Gusinskiy and Berezovskiy as well as the takeover of the most influential TV channels in Russia - Gusinkiy’s independent NTV and Berezovskiy’s pro-government ORT (Koltsova, 2006; Oates, 2006);

Table 2. Russian Media History

The contemporary Russian media model which results from this mix of market ownership structures and local political and economic structures cemented by Putin in the early 2000s has a dual nature. As Kiriya argues, some of the media’s elements, including commercial advertising, news journalism and the various privately owned media properties, are borrowed or imported from Western models, while others, such as relations with political power, the prohibition on private ownership of certain types of media, the use of media for forceful advancement of government policy and the generally narrow participation of

the population in the public sphere, are largely indigenous to Russia (Kiriya, 2018, p. 98).

This intersection of market-driven logic and statist political environment creates a continuum of different forms of media ownership. As Kiriya and Degtereva (2010) argue, there are three main forms of ownership which combine market mechanisms and state control in the biggest post-Soviet media market – broadcasting. Media are: 1) directly owned by the state; 2) indirectly owned by the state through the state companies; or 3) indirectly controlled by the state through owners who are loyal to the state. Similarly, Vartanova and Smirnov argue that

The main tendency in the evolution of large media ownership in this country in the 2000s has been a decrease in commercial capital and the proportionate increase in state capital and mixed capital. The media are concentrated (directly or indirectly) in the hands of governmental or government-controlled structures (Vartanova & Smirnov, 2010, p. 25).

To put Russian media in comparative perspective (Hallin & Mancini 2004; 2011), Vartanova introduced the concept of the “statist commercialized model” which elegantly summarizes these heterogenous tendencies (Vartanova, 2011). On one hand, this model is purely commercial and profit-driven (Vartanova, 2019).

Russian media organizations rely on advertisement for survival and feature a wide variety of entertainment content. Like the processes in the market media systems, Russian media are quite diversified which leads to the fragmentation of audiences. While the main TV channels attract the largest audiences, a plethora of niche channels also enjoy considerable attention (Nazarov, 2019). On the other hand, the main TV channels are in one or another way affiliated with or controlled by the state. In other words, the Russian media model has a high degree of political parallelism. Instead of being independent and disinterested, media reflect distinct political orientations and are tied to political actors. While many pluralist models in democratic countries have high degree of political parallelism (e.g., Italy, Spain, France), the use of media by Russian political elites constitutes a distinct “Russian form of political parallelism” (Vartanova, 2011, p. 129). The specificity of this form of political parallelism is reflected in the fact that “integrated state–business elite,” rather than competing political elites, “has supported the use of political media in new circumstances as traditional instruments of political elite management” (p. 129).

1.3. Digital Challenge

The statist commercialized model is a glocalized hybrid combining global and local: the elements of market economy/private ownership and statist patterns of control. Another dimension of glocalization in Russian media environment is the process of development of global communication technologies which have been taking root in the Russian context: digitalization of broadcasting, the economic transformation of media industries under the pressure of new technologies, and the development of the Internet. Since the early 1990s, European and American media industries experienced the transition to digital television. It included the conversion of analog broadcasting into digital broadcasting, the increase of quality of broadcasting, the decrease of interference, the introduction of HD (high definition) television, the increase in the number of channels, interactivity, and additional information provided for each broadcast. In Russia, this transition was delayed. In the 1990s, Russian television was busy solving other problems, such as privatization. In 2019, all Russian regions made a complete transition to digital television (Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 2019).

Just like commercialization, digitalization of broadcasting significantly diversifies media environment. Multiplying available sources of information, digital media create high-choice media environments where preference rather than access becomes a key predictor of media consumption (Prior, 2007). While the introduction of digital broadcasting diversified broadcasting in Russia, this process also had a political logic. As in case of the installation of the elements of market ownership after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the global communication trend of implementation of digital television was reshaped by the statist nature of the system of media control. Russian digital television uses the terrestrial DVB-T2 standard with MPEG format. All channels are packed into two multiplexes – data packages for broadcasting by the same transmitter. The first multiplex RTRS-1 includes *Pervii Kanal* (Channel One), *Rossia 1* (Russia 1), *Rossia 2* (Russia 2), *NTV*, *Piatii Kanal* (Fifth Channel), *Rossia-K* (Russia – Culture), *Rossia 24* (Russia 24), *Karusel'* (Carousel), *TV Tsentri* (TV Center); the second multiplex RTRS-2 includes *Ren-TV*, *SPAS*, *STS*, *Domashnii* (Home Channel), *TV3*, *Sport Plus*, *Zvezda* (The Star), *Mir* (The World), *TNT* and *Muz-TV* (Music-TV). The transition to digital television via multiplexes was strongly shaped by political circumstances. The first multiplex included only state channels, while the second multiplex included commercial ones. As a result, multiplex structure was used

as a filter to cement the role of the state-controlled television in the country. As Strukov and Zvereva argue, “digital revolution, which is being implemented in Russia in the area of television in the ‘top-down’ fashion, retains many features of the pre-digital model of television despite new opportunities offered by the very ‘digital’” (Strukov & Zvereva, 2014, p. XV). Implementing digitalization in the top-down fashion, the government and government-affiliated television channels attempted both to achieve diversification of content which can satisfy the preferences of the population and generate profits, and to cement the leading role in controlling the broadcasting. As Strukov and Zvereva proceed, “the population has access to this process only as consumers of a new product except for the cases when people are directly involved in the area of communication [as professionals]” (Strukov & Zvereva, 2014, p. XV). In other words, while TV viewers are provided with diverse content, their preferences play little role in determining this content. The framing and focus of political content in Russian TV news are mostly dictated by the state, while the characteristics of entertainment content are dictated by the preferences of media professionals rather than audiences.

While the threat of uncontrolled multiplication of information sources due to digitalization of broadcasting was successfully overcome by the Russian state via introduction of the state-supervised multiplexes, further digitalization, such as customization of content, non-linear TV, and the spread of mobile applications, still challenges the statist commercialized model. As Vartanova puts it,

In the past two decades the statist character of the Russian media has been challenged by the growing commercialism of the media industry. The profit-based logic of media organizations using the matrix of the Liberal model has put Russian media far beyond traditional practices (Vartanova, 2011, p. 142).

Scholars outline four scenarios for the future development of the media industry:

- *Inertial*: advertising-driven model and broadcasting TV remain dominant; stagnation of printed press and the growth of online media.
- *Nonlinear television-based*: television is being gradually replaced with smart nonlinear television; gradual replacement of an advertising-driven model with a content-based model; growth of online media and the development of niche media).

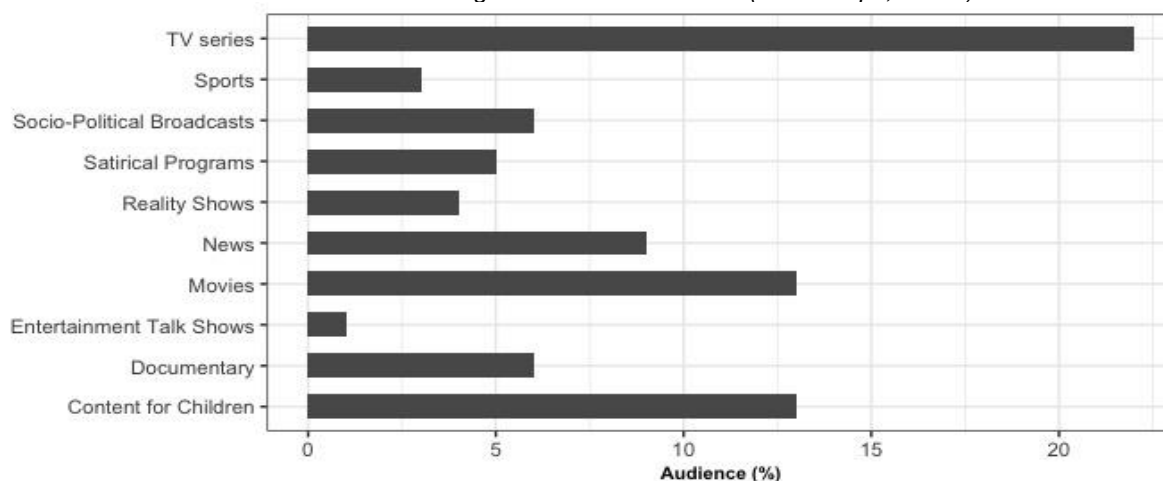
- *Revolutionary*: overcoming the digital divide between regions; broadcast television is replaced with mobile television; the advertising-driven model is replaced with a content-based model; stagnation of printed press and the growth of mobile applications.
- *Customization-oriented*: decrease in the proportion of broadcast television; advertising-driven model is retained but with maximum customization of content and advertisement; increase of the role of Big Data methodologies and news aggregators.

Media professionals from different areas of the media market interviewed by Vartanova agree that the inertial scenario dominates media market and is more likely to dominate in Russia in the nearest future. Broadcast television will remain dominant, and an advertising-driven model will be the key business model. The dominance of broadcast television will be accompanied by the further stagnation of the printed press and the growth of online media. The growth of online media will not overcome the digital divide between major cities and the rest of the country. In a nutshell, the global trend of further digitalization of media content is not strong enough to challenge the television-dominant and advertising-based model. While growing in importance, it is still displaced and channeled to the outskirts of the media market. In the near future, the media market is likely to split into co-existing marginal high-quality content-based personalized paid market and dominant “basic market, which will force its way through endless advertisers’ curtains” (Vartanova et al., 2016, p. 73).

1.4. Television: Genres, Contents, Audiences

The combination of market structures and state control is reflected in the contents and genres of Russian television. The political economy of the statist commercialized model partly explains the content of Russian TV. On one hand, most of the TV programming is diverse entertainment. According to Mediascope agency (2019a), fifty most popular TV channels feature the following content: TV series, movies, entertainment talk shows, satirical programs, reality shows, socio-political broadcasts, content for children, documentary, news, sports. Three main categories of content dominate television content: TV series, movies, and content for children.

Figure 1 Genre Breakdown (Mediascope, 2019a)



As in the case of the statist commercialized model, Russian television borrows Western genres and content adopting them for local audience. Game shows are an illustrative example: *Pole Chudes* (The Field of Wonders) and *Kto Khochet Stat' Millionerom?* (Who Wants to be a Millionaire?), the two most popular game shows of the 1990s and 2000s, are adapted versions of the Western *Wheel* and *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* While the former was licensed by the original provider (Pervii Kanal, 2008), the latter was appropriated illegally but significantly changed (Rulyova, 2007). Other popular entertainment content includes Western-style reality TV shows, soap operas, police dramas, true crime shows, talk shows, and movies. Russian television strongly depends on importing Western entertainment formats because of the necessity to attract audiences. By providing a wide variety of entertainment content, Russian television generates advertising revenue which is the main source of income regardless of the type of ownership or control by the government (Vartanova & Smirnov, 2010).

On the other hand, the other type of content which constitutes a large share of total broadcast time is news. Important news broadcasts include *Vremia* (The Time, Channel One), *Vesti Nedeli* (The News of the Week, Russia 1), *Vechnie Novosti* (The Evening News, Channel One), *Vesti* (The News, Russia 1), and *Mestnoe Vremia* (The Local News, Russia 1). The news on federal channels mostly focuses on the ruling elites (the leaders of the government, government representatives, members of legislative bodies), bureaucratic elites (public officials) with rare inclusions of economic elites (owners of the big business and managers of the financial or industrial corporations). Domestic news focuses on Moscow almost exclusively. Russian regions appear in the news broadcasts only when the events being covered have

something to do with the ruling, bureaucratic or economic elites, or when something extraordinary happens (Novikova, 2014).

Similar to liberal media models, there is a great deal of reliance on the tabloid-style reporting and sensationalism even among non-entertainment news broadcasts. Just like political reporting in market models merging news and entertainment (Moeller, 1999; Thussu, 2007), Russian television reporting relies on sensationalism and ignores in-depth analysis (Oates, 2006). However, what makes Russia different from typical commercial broadcasting systems is the relative monopoly of the state over political content. The news on Russian TV channels lacks diversity and represents the Kremlin's line (e.g., Lipman, 2009; Oates & Lokot, 2013). The state uses three main tools to control political reporting. Funding is one of the main tools Russian government uses to control television (Kiriya, 2018; Koltsova, 2006). However, the cases of direct intervention in the editorial policy by owners are actually rare – on a day-to-day basis, it is rather based on journalists' good understanding of the line (Oates, 2006) and reproduced by journalists' self-censorship embedded in journalistic routines (Schimpfossel & Yablokov, 2014). This self-censorship has developed as a way to adapt to pressure from owners and the political sphere (Nygren et al., 2018). These tools do not guarantee complete control over political narratives. In fact, journalists on state-aligned television enjoy some autonomy in approaching social and political issues (Koltsova, 2006; Schimpfossel & Yablokov, 2014). However, this autonomy decreases proportionally to the increasing sensitive nature of reported issues. As Oates argues, "There is a large amount of media diversity except on key political topics [...] Thus, there is an appearance of media diversity, but little meaningful challenge to the regime" (Oates, 2016, p. 402)

Finally, in addition to clearly delineated entertainment and news, Russian television features a wide variety of broadcasts which blur the lines between political and non-political content. Several types of non-news broadcast feature political content which incorporates some of the regime's narratives. Documentary projects and movies, such as *Osnovano Na Real'nykh Sobytiakh* (Based on Actual Events), *Sekretnye Spiski* (Secret Lists), and *Zabytye Vozhdi* (Forgotten Leaders), use some of the regime's narratives to cover Soviet history, international and domestic politics. Similarly, many socio-political talk shows and broadcasts, such as *60 minut* (60 minutes) and *Vecher s Vladimirom Solov'evym* (An Evening with Vladimir Solov'ev), reproduce the regime's narratives regarding current politics, the Russia-West standoff,

and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, wrapping them in more entertaining formats similar to infotainment in market-based models (Thussu, 2007).

Overall, Russian television relies on the combination of entertainment to attract audiences, news to propagate the regime's narratives, and the blurred zone in between which includes both. The normative models of the press dictate that in commercial media systems market-oriented nature of the media is connected to political independence. While commercialization can lead to many adverse effects, such as tabloid-style reporting, sensationalism, ignoring important issues and concerns of minorities, advertising revenue as the main source of income guarantees certain degree of autonomy from the state and political pressures and the professionalization of journalists (Baran & Davis, 2011; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Siebert et al., 1963). In Russia, advertising revenue and political independence of media are decoupled. Just as other liberal commercial models, Russian media rely on entertainment, advertising revenue, and Western formats and genres including all adverse effects, such as tabloid-style reporting and sensationalism. However, the commercial nature of the media model does not provide political independence. Rather, commercial elements of the Russian media system allow for financial survival and naturally blend with the statist system of political control. As Vartanova and Smirnov argue, competition, which is supposed to result from the diversity of entertainment content in market media model, cements statist measures of control instead of undermining them:

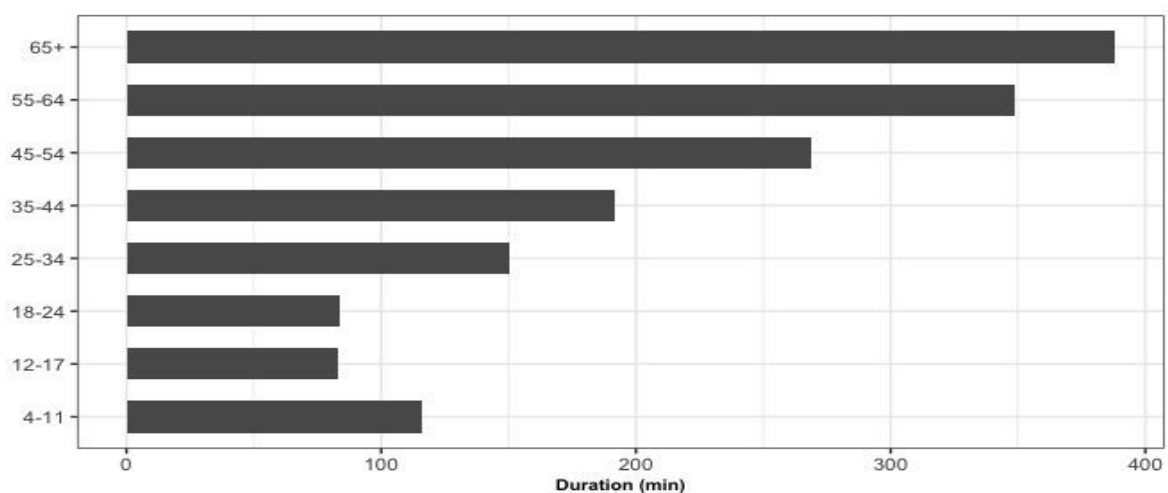
The paradox of the Russian media market is that competition, an inherent value of Anglo-Saxon ideal of independent journalism, does not guarantee economic freedom to the Russian media. Far from it: the decentralization of economic resources in the regional markets and the strong competition between newspapers and TV companies turn out to be beneficial not to the media and their audiences but to the authorities, enabling them to control the media more efficiently. In fact, competition in economically weak markets should be regarded as a shortcoming of the modern media system in Russia (Vartanova & Smirnov, 2010, p. 26).

As a result, the content of Russian TV is a peculiar mix of entertainment and politically biased news.

Who are the audiences who watch this diverse mix of entertainment and politically biased news? According to Mediascope (2019a), Russia is very television

centric. Sixty-seven percent of the population watch TV at least once a day. Twenty-nine percent of the population tune in to their screens every prime-time period. The average Russian TV viewer spends four hours a day watching TV. However, while Russians watch television a lot, watching is stratified by region, gender, age, and preferences. Watching television is slightly stratified by region: the more developed and central is the region, the less people watch television. For instance, Siberian and Far Eastern federal districts are the leaders of watching television. On average, in these regions people tune in to television for 266 and 250 minutes a day respectively, while in the Central district people watch television for only 220 minutes a day (Mediascope, 2019b). Watching is stratified by gender and age significantly more. Women watch television more. Being discovered in the 1960s (Firsov, 1972), this tendency is still present in Russia. On average, women watch television for 246 minutes a day, while men watch television for only 190 minutes a day (Mediascope, 2019c). Watching television is also stratified by age in terms of number of channels people watch and duration of watching. On average, people from 4 to 44 years old tune in to six channels a day, and people older than 45 years old tune in nine channels a day. The duration of watching also varies widely. From 88 minutes for people who are 18-24 years old to almost 400 minutes for people who are older than 65 years old (Mediascope, 2019a).

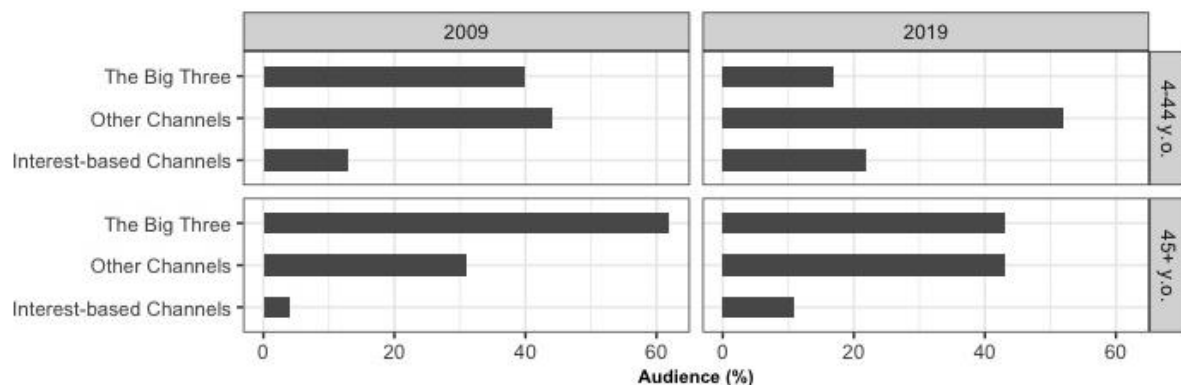
Figure 2 Average Duration of Watching (Mediascope, 2019a)



Similar to the trends in other market media systems in the 1980s and 1990s, Russian audiences have undergone significant fragmentation. In response to the formation of high-choice media environments, the audiences in the U.S. and European countries have become significantly fragmented (Prior, 2007). The structure of the media landscape diversified by cable television and the Internet often has the “long

tail” structure. Few nationwide channels-leaders target nationwide audiences without adapting to particular preferences. They are followed by medium-sized channels with smaller audiences. Medium-sized channels are followed by a plethora of small-size channels targeting specific age groups and tailored to satisfy specific preferences (Anderson, 2006). While Russia follows this tendency with a delay, in the recent decade, Russian audiences have been undergoing significant fragmentation as well. Like fragmented high-choice environments in the U.S. and Europe, Russian media landscape has the “long tail” structure. The “big three” - *Channel One, Russia 1, and NTV* - are the leaders who attract the largest audiences. They are followed by several middle-sized channels, such as TNT and REN TV, who attract fewer viewers. The middle-sized channels are followed by a plethora of preference- and interest-based channels, such as *Disney, Match, Russia-K*, which tailor their content to meet specific preferences, such as culture, sports, and music (Nazarov, 2019). While this fragmentation was present in the 2000s, it has become significantly deeper in the last decade. For the past ten years, the importance of the “big three” decreased, and the importance of niche channels increased for both older and younger cohorts (Mediascope, 2019a).

Figure 3 Audience Fragmentation (Mediascope, 2019a)

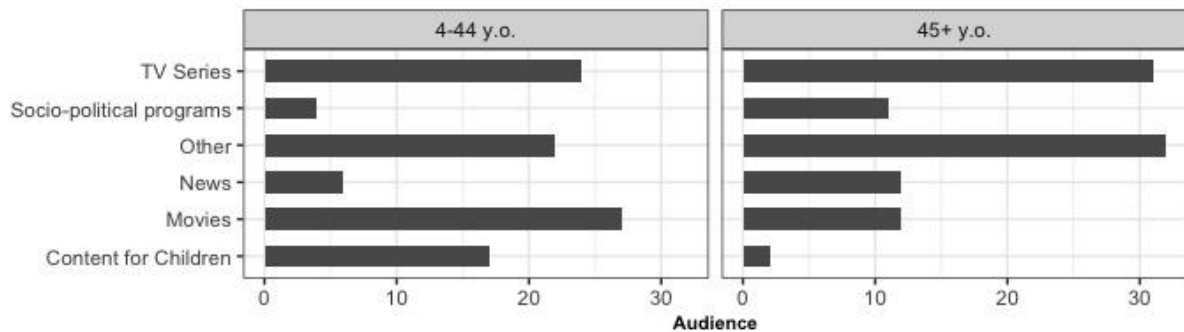


Preference-based fragmentation and the declining role of the large channels which target broader audiences without tailoring their content to specific preferences evolve along the same lines for both older and younger cohorts. However, the effect is more pronounced in the case of younger cohorts. Although niche channels were important for the younger cohorts already in the 2000s, they successfully challenged the dominance of the “big three” in the 2010s. On the contrary, in the case of older cohorts, fragmentation is not that pronounced, and the “big three” are more influential.

The audiences’ preferences more or less mirror the breakdown of content and genres featured by the “big three” of Russian TV channels discussed above. The most

popular content comprises TV series and movies followed by the news and socio-political broadcasts. The ratio of news and entertainment varies across age groups. In general, younger people tend to consume more entertainment and pay less attention to the news and socio-political broadcasts. On the contrary, older people consume less entertainment and watch twice as much news and three times more socio-political programs.

Figure 4 Content Preferences by Age (Mediascope, 2019a)



For instance, the list of top 10 programs for Fall 2019, a fairly representative of total broadcasting time on the most popular channels, includes a mix of TV series, various entertainment TV shows, news, and sports.

Name	Channel	Type	Rating
<i>Znakhar'</i> ("The Healer")	Channel One	TV Series	6.8%
<i>Golos</i> ("The Voice")	Channel One	Competition TV Show	5.9%
<i>Sekret Na Million</i> ("A Secret Worth a Million")	NTV	Competition TV Show	5.8%
<i>Pust' Govoriat</i> ("Let Them Speak")	Channel One	Talk Show	5.6%
<i>Formula Mesti</i> ("The Formula of Revenge")	Channel One	TV Series	5.5%
<i>Vremia</i> ("Time")	Channel One	News	5.3%
<i>Smeshannyye edinoborstva</i> ("Mixed Martial Arts")	Channel One	Sport	5.3%
<i>Mestnoe Vremia</i> ("Local Time")	Russia - 1	News	5.5%
<i>Skoraia pomoshch' 2</i> ("Paramedics 2")	NTV	TV Series	5.0%
<i>Golos. 60+</i> ("The Voice. 60+")	Channel One	Competition TV Show	5.0%
<i>Pole Chudes</i> ("The Field of Wonders")	Channel One	Game Show	4.7%

Table 3. Most Popular Content, Fall 2019

While socio-political talk shows and broadcasts are not in the top 10 programs, they also enjoy considerable attention. For instance, the ratings of *Moskva. Kreml'. Putin* ("Moscow, Kremlin, Putin") and *60 minut* ("60 minutes") - the most popular socio-political broadcast and talk show of 2019 – are 3.6% and 3% which is not far from the top 10 programs.

In general, Russian broadcasting is uneven and accommodates contradictory tendencies. While used for propaganda purposes, it is extremely entertainment-

oriented. As British journalist Peter Pomerantsev who worked for Russian TV in the 2000s argues in his memories,

The new Kremlin won't make the same mistake the old Soviet Union did: it will never let TV become dull. The task is to synthesize Soviet control with Western entertainment. Twenty-first-century Ostankino mixes show business and propaganda, ratings with authoritarianism (Pomerantsev, 2015, Ch. 1, para. 5)

Russian television relies on the combination of entertainment to attract audiences, news to propagate the regime's narratives, and the blurred zone in between, such as socio-political talk shows and programs, which blend entertainment and politics. All these genres enjoy considerable attention. While preference for entertainment trumps the popularity of other forms of content, the news and socio-political programs still enjoy considerable attention. The news and socio-political content constitute 10% and 23% of the media diets of younger and older cohorts respectively. However, even if one prefers to escape politics by paying attention only to entertainment, they are still likely to encounter the regime's narratives which are incorporated in movies, TV series, cultural content, and non-political talk shows. This presence of the official narratives in television content guarantees that a regular TV viewer – including those who take part in this study – is likely to be familiar with the regime's narratives if even he or she attempts to escape them.

1.5. New Media and the Government: The Divided Approach

Television broadcasting is one of the largest segments of the Russian market and an important part of Russian culture and society. It has traditionally been considered to be an important political asset by both Soviet and post-Soviet Russian elites. Unlike television, the Internet is a fairly recent technology which started to take hold in Russia in the early 2000s. It has been recognized as an important political and economic resource only recently. Before the early 2010s, Russia lacked any comprehensive legislation regulating Internet nor did it have any significant governmental projects facilitating the development of the Internet. As Oates argues, it was regulated via indirect legislation, such as constitutional and federal law, the laws related to mass media and national security, and electronic commerce law (Oates, 2013). Although there were some repressive laws limiting freedom of speech online, such as SORM-2 (System for Operative Investigative Activities) allowing for surveillance communication

on the Internet, they were balanced by a number of pieces of legislation which were surprisingly democratic. For instance, the constitutional law and the 2010 Russian Supreme Court Resolution 16 set a limit on the control of freedom of speech and were “surprisingly liberal for a state that has pursued relatively strict controls in much of its media sphere” (p. 94) and lacking “sweeping controls for the Russian internet” (p. 97). In general, “a large amount of dissidence and a wide range of free speech was tolerated in the online sphere prior to the end of 2011. As a result, the state was content to allow, and even foster, discussion in the online sphere to maintain an illusion of a civic space” (p. 49). Since the early 2010s, the Russian government has taken a divided approach to this burgeoning new media sphere, welcoming global communication trends and incorporating elements of political control similar to television. As Oates argues, “while the government clearly promotes the use of the internet for social and economic development, it also uses the internet as an additional political tool for control and co-optation” (p. 87).

In the early 2010s, the Internet was recognized as a social and economic resource. This change resulted in former President Medvedev’s broader “modernization” agenda. This agenda implied moving from the dependence on gas and oil revenues to high-tech knowledge-based economy and included the development of information technologies and infrastructure for communication (Wilson, 2015). The government introduced a number of programs and allocated significant resources to develop telecommunication infrastructure, implement digital technologies in economy, and provide access to the Internet across Russia. For instance, in the 2010s, the government introduced the program “Information Society (2011-2020)” which aimed at the development of the Internet. The program covered a broad array of issues, such as facilitation of economic and market growth, overcoming the “digital divide” between regions, realizing the rights of citizens for access to information and protection of private data, the development of the Internet infrastructure, and integration of Russia in the global information community. The government allocated 1.15 billion rubles to achieve these goals (Informatsionnoe Obshchestvo, 2013). Similarly, in 2018, the government introduced the national project “Digital Economy”. The program aimed at the development of Internet regulation, Internet infrastructure, training specialists for digital economy as well as implementation of e-governance. The government allocated 1.63 billion rubles to achieve these goals (Tsifrovaia ekonomika, 2019).

In the context of the current Russia-Ukraine crisis and Russia’s standoff with the West, one might find the goal of “integration of Russia in the global information community” surprising. Opinions change rapidly, and several years later the government would repurpose global digital technology pursuing control and isolation. Since the early 2010s, the Internet has also been perceived as a significant threat. As Oates argues, “the development of internet law in Russia has grown more slowly than the use of the internet” (Oates, 2013, p. 93). Indeed, until the 2011-2012 post-electoral cycle of protests, Russian government did not have comprehensive law regulating Internet nor did it try to significantly constrain it. However, after the 2011-12 mobilization, the Internet was recognized as a significant threat to the regime. As a result, the government passed a number of laws replotting the online sphere to minimize the potential threat of political dissent facilitated by the new media. There are several key laws which have significantly constrained online freedom of speech in the recent years reshaping the global communication trend of the development of the Internet.

Year	Federal Law	Contents	Consequences
2012	“Mizulina law” (139-FZ)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The government can block websites containing pornography, information about drugs or suicide without a court order; The creation of common list of blocked websites; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increases the power of the Roskomnadzor, Russia’s media watchdog, in controlling freedom of speech online;
2014	“Lugovoy law” (398-FZ)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The government can block websites containing extremist information without a court order; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What falls under “extremism” is defined by the Office of the Prosecutor General. As a result, the law gives the government sweeping powers to block content online at will;
2014	242-FZ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compels Russian companies to store citizens’ personal data only inside Russia; Foreign Internet companies operating on the territory of Russia, such as Google and Facebook, are also required to store personal data of Russian citizens on Russian territory; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increases power of Roskomnadzor in controlling freedom of speech online; Since it is technically impossible to compel foreign companies to store data in Russia, the law can be used selectively to persecute particular companies and media; In 2016, this law was applied to block social network LinkedIn in Russia;
2014	179-FZ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Modifies anti-extremism articles 280 and 282 of the Criminal Code to include extremist messages and hate speech disseminated online; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What falls under “extremism” is defined by the Office of the Prosecutor General and, as a result, gives the government sweeping powers to persecute political opposition and regular

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internet is being equated to other media; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> citizens who happened to criticize the regime;
2014	“Bloggers’ law” (97-FZ)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bloggers with more than 3,000 unique monthly visitors have to register with Roscomnadzor and indicate the name and electronic address on their websites; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The law was supposed to facilitate control of Roskomnadzor over Internet but provoked harsh criticism and was abolished in 2017;
2016	“Yarovaya package” (374-FZ)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compels communication providers to store personal data, including calls and messages, and metadata, such as name, time, and location, for 6 months; Authorizes law enforcement to demand this data from providers without a court order ; Messaging services which use encryption are required to pass encryption keys to the Federal Security Service; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gives sweeping powers to FSB to monitor regular citizens’ communications at will; Imposes significant financial burden on the Internet and telecommunication providers; In 2018, Roskomnadzor attempted to block messaging service Telegram for the failure to comply with the law and pass encryption keys to FSB; the attempts failed;
2019	“Fake news law” (28-FZ)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The government can block information which falls under the law’s definition of “fake news” without a court order. The application of the law also results in fines for the bearers of the “fake news”; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What falls under the “fake news” is defined by the Office of the Prosecutor General and, as a result, gives the government sweeping powers to block content online at will;
2019	“Sovereign internet law” (90-FZ)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internet providers are obliged to install devices filtering traffic; The access to websites prohibited in Russia can be restricted; The creation of the national system of Internet domains; Roskomnadzor can disconnect Russian Internet from the rest of the world; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Although the creation of the sovereign Internet space is hardly possible technically, the law increases the authority of Roskomnadzor in constraining freedom of speech online and further disadvantages Internet providers vis-à-vis the government;
2019	“On News Aggregators” (208-FZ)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> News aggregators have to register with Roskomnadzor; When disseminated information is taken from unregistered media, a news aggregator bears legal responsibility if it violates the law; If media is registered with the state, a news aggregator avoids legal responsibility; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The law creates stimuli for news aggregators to disseminate information taken only from the media registered with the state restricting diversity of media content and freedom of speech online;

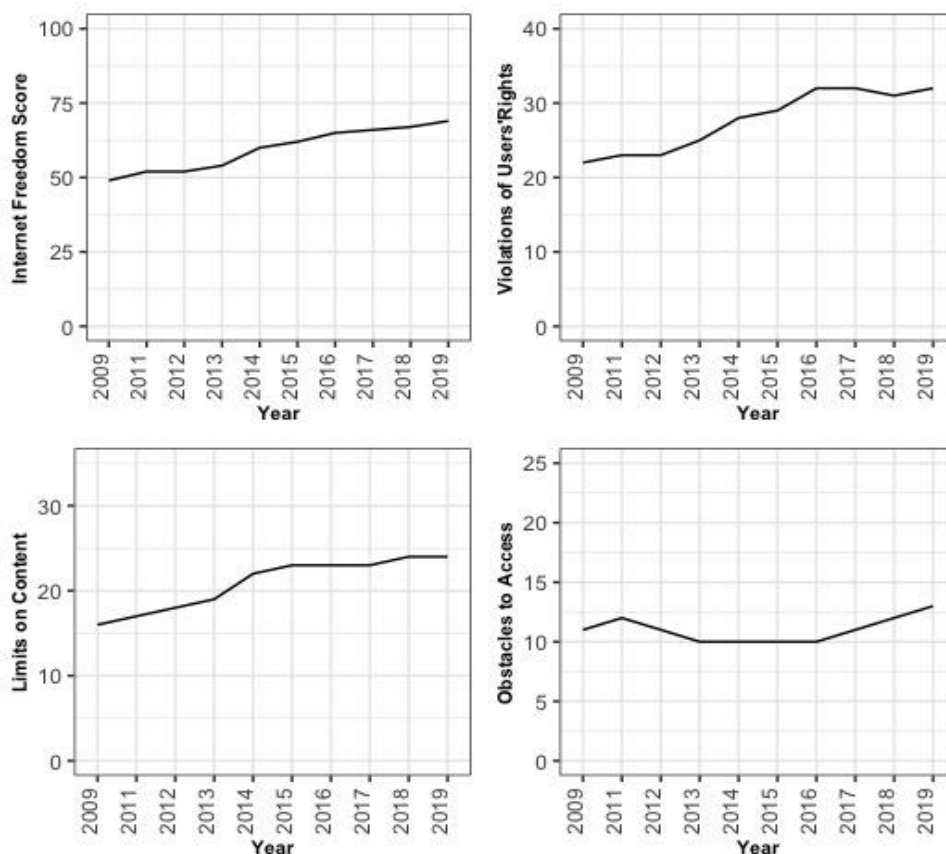
Table 4. Legal Restrictions of the Internet in Russia

As can be seen from the list, Russian government attempts to constrain the online sphere via several kinds of legal control. Some laws, such federal laws 139, 398, 179, 97, 28, 208, target the contents of online sphere. Other laws, such as federal laws 242, 374, 90, target the infrastructure of online sphere – Internet providers. In addition, legal infrastructural control is also combined with extra-legal measures. As

Sivetc (2019) shows in a case study, *Yandex, Mail, and Rambler*, the companies owning the main Russian search engines and news aggregators, cooperate with private-public partnership between Netoscope - a project combating malware, spam, and bots - and Roskomnadzor – a state agency regulating the media. Some prominent liberal news outlets, such as Novaya Gazeta and Grani.ru, were included in the Netoscope database as containing malware and then removed. As a result, they were downgraded in search queries. This case study demonstrates that in addition to traditional methods “based on post ante techniques, such as penalizing by courts” the government also relies on new extra-legal techniques which are “focused on ex ante tools, such as filtering and blocking by private intermediaries” (p. 7).

The government has exhibited a divided approach to Internet sources, such as online news media, news aggregators, and social media. While clearly encouraging the development of the Internet infrastructure, universal access to the Internet as well as implementation of digital technologies in economy, it increasingly tries to regulate every aspect of it in order to prevent any possible threat to the regime. According to Freedom House’s expert rating, Internet freedom in Russia has been plummeting in recent years.

Figure 5 Freedom House Internet Score



From 49 in 2009 (“partly free”), the restrictions of online freedom increased to 67 in 2018 (“not free”) on the scale from 0 (best) to 100 (worst). It places Russia on par with a number of authoritarian regimes, such as Kazakhstan (62), Belarus (64), Sudan (65) and Turkey (66). Freedom House uses three variables to assess general freedom score – obstacles to access (based on Internet penetration), limits on content (legal constraints imposed in the online sphere), and violations of users’ rights (legal persecution as well as extra-legal violence) (Freedom House, 2018). Interestingly, the variables which contribute most to the decrease in general freedom score are limits on content and violations of users’ rights, while obstacles to access vacillates around the same level. The statistics seems to result from the divided approach of the government to the online sphere. While encouraging growth in digital technologies and expanding access to the Internet, it strongly constrains the online sphere legally and politically at the same time.

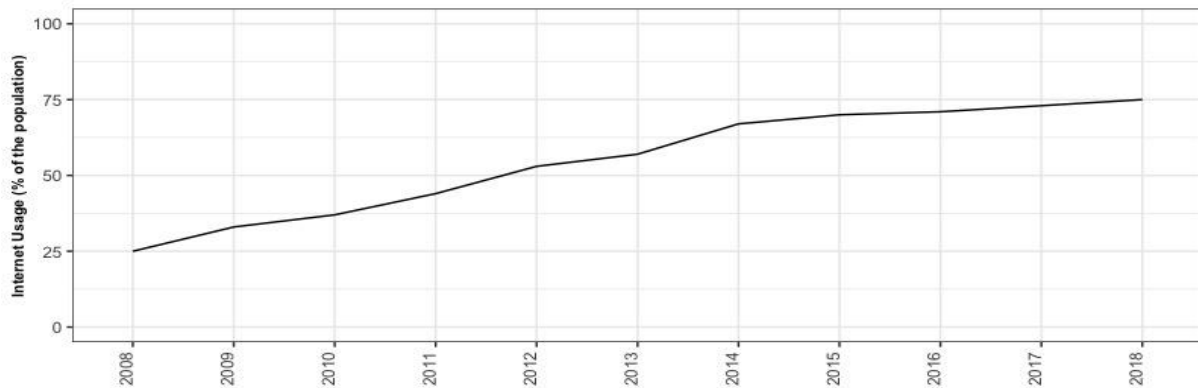
Like the ownership model and the process of digitalization, the politics of the government in the area of new media is also an illustrative example of glocalization. While embracing global universal trends and facilitating the development of the Internet due to its contributions to economy and social communication, it glocalizes them by introducing multiple restrictions which constrain the democratic potential of the Internet in the attempt to cement the regime’s monopoly on political power. These contradictory tendencies lead to the formation of an uneven digital environment. Being actively constrained by the regime, digital media still provide access to all points of view and information which can be found at will, provided one has enough interest and knowledge to make sense of the enormous amount of information. Given the total digitalization of the population, it is clear that digital media crucially mediate the influence of broadcasting television. As a result, understanding patterns of control of digital media and digital media audiences is essential for understanding the Russian TV viewer. To understand the influence of digital media on Russian society better, the audience of digital media should be further considered.

1.6. New Media: Genres, Contents, Audiences

The audience which navigates this diverse but politically constrained landscape is large. According to the Russian Federal Agency on the Press and Mass

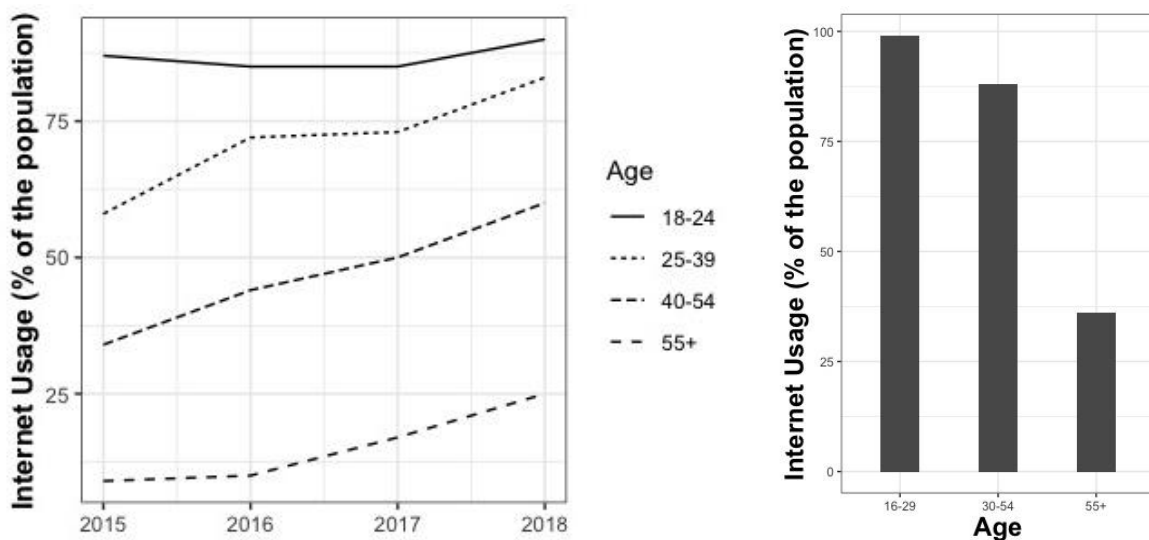
Communication (2019), Internet usage in Russia has risen threefold in the last ten years— from 25% in 2008 to 79% in 2019.

Figure 6 Internet Usage (GFK Russia, 2018)



The increase in the usage of the Internet in the recent years is related to several factors: the digitalization the of older cohorts of the population and the spread of mobile devices. First, while Russian youth is already extremely digitalized, the digitalization of older cohorts of the population has significantly contributed to the increase in use of the Internet use in the recent years. According to the GFK Russia business agency (2018), total (not daily) Internet usage of the younger cohort aged 16-29 is 99%. Total Internet usage by people aged 30-54 and 55+ is 88% and 36% respectively. According to Russian pollster, the Levada Center (2018), while Internet usage has remained constant among youth (85-90%), more than 25% of people falling within the 25-39 and 40-54 age cohorts have started to use Internet in the past three years. Internet usage among those in the oldest cohort of the population has risen by 15%.

Figure 7 Internet Usage and Age (Levada Center, 2018; GFK Russia, 2018)



Second, the active digitalization of society in recent years is partly underlined by the spread of mobile devices. According to GFK Russia, the usage of the mobile Internet on smartphones increased dramatically from 2013 to 2018. In total, 61% of people aged 16+ use mobile Internet on tablets and smartphones. 41% of people aged 16-29, 30% of people aged 30-54, and 9% of people aged 55+ use mobile Internet exclusively (GFK Russia, 2018).

Figure 8 Devices (GFK Russia, 2018)

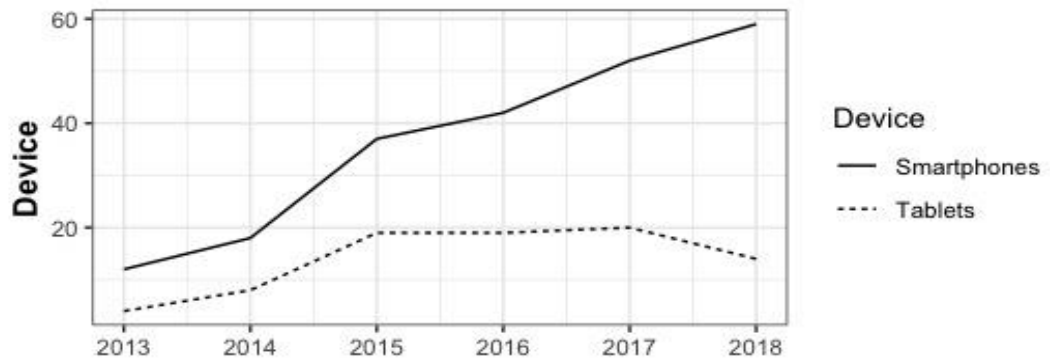
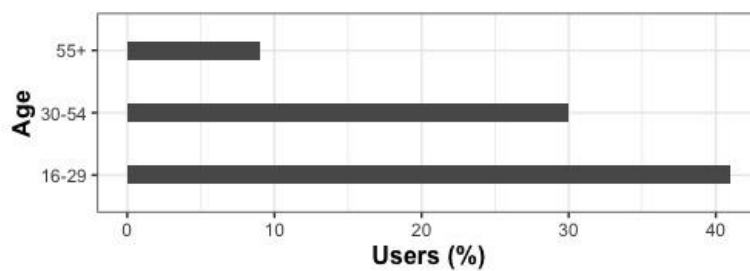


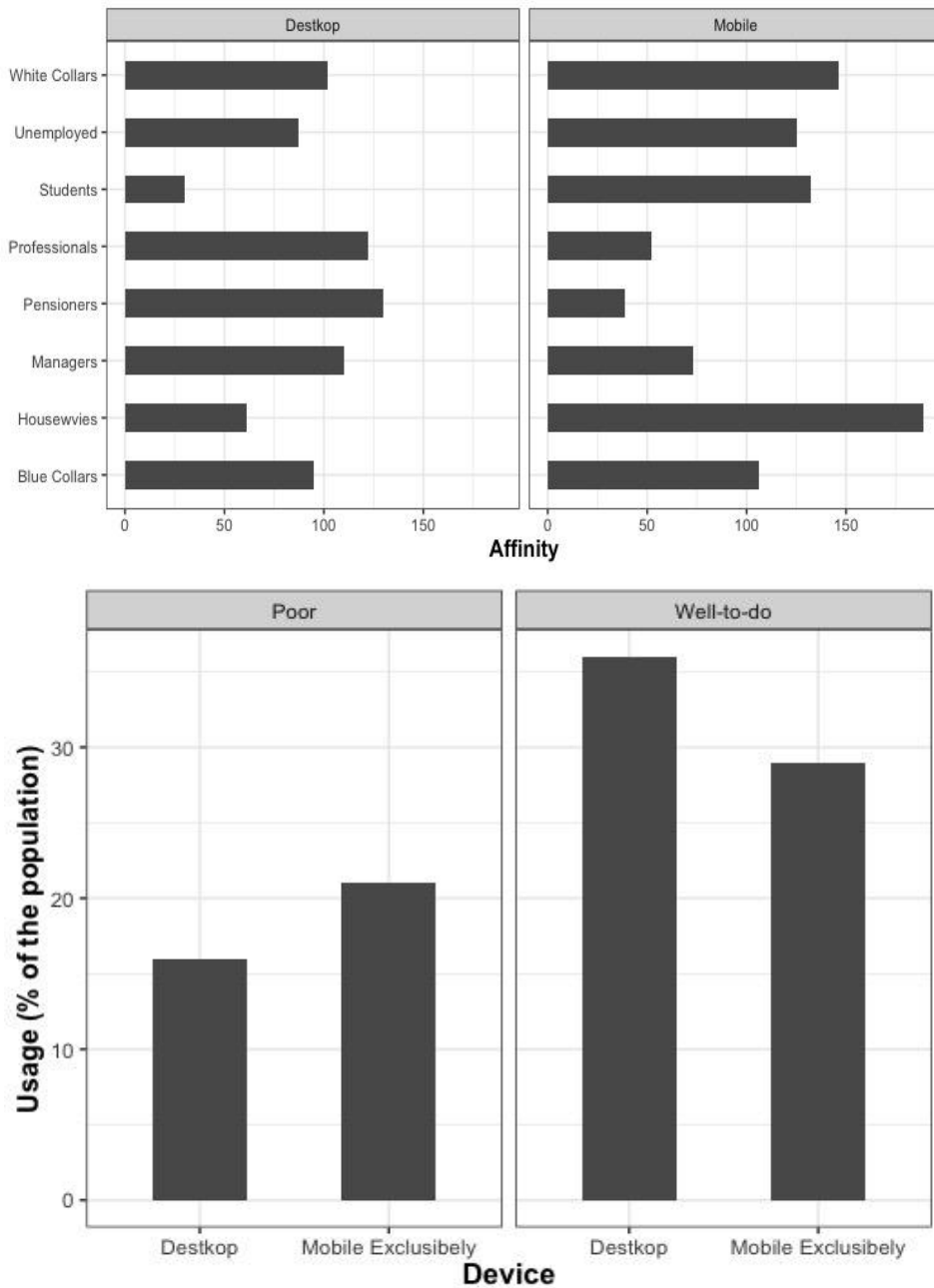
Figure 9 Mobile Only (GFK Russia, 2018)



Being much cheaper than computers, mobile devices mitigate socio-economic and geographic inequalities in usage of the Internet by providing access to the Internet to broader strata of the population. According to the Mediascope agency (Mediascope, 2019d), poor people are more likely to use mobile Internet exclusively than well-to-do people. The professional breakdown of the Internet usage shows a similar pattern: among those who tend to use desktop Internet more than mobile Internet are managers, professional specialists, and pensioners. Among those who tend to use mobile Internet devices more than desktop Internet devices are blue and white collars, students, the unemployed, and housewives (Mediascope, 2018)⁴. These data suggest that people of lower socio-economic status are the primary group who benefit from the expansion of the Internet penetration caused by cheaper mobile devices, while people of higher economic status are already quite digitalized.

⁴ Affinity index - the weight of a target audience compared to the total population under investigation.

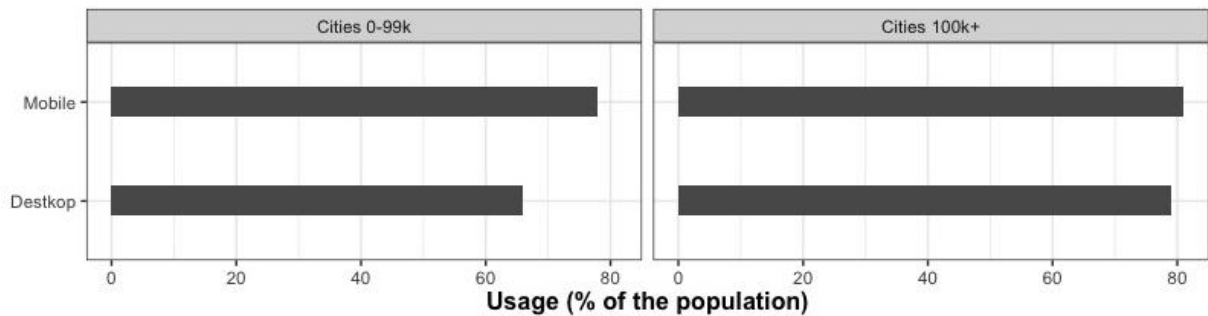
Figure 10 Internet and Inequality (Mediascope, 2019d)



Similarly, the mobile Internet mitigates some of the geographical inequalities, giving access to the Internet to a wider population across the country. According to Mediascope, the number of people who use desktop and mobile Internet devices in bigger cities (100k+) and smaller cities (0-99k) is approximately the same. However, in smaller cities, the mobile Internet is significantly more widespread than the desktop Internet is (Mediascope, 2019d). Given the rise in mobile Internet use, these data suggest that people living in small cities are the group which benefits from the expansion of Internet penetration resulting from cheaper mobile devices more than

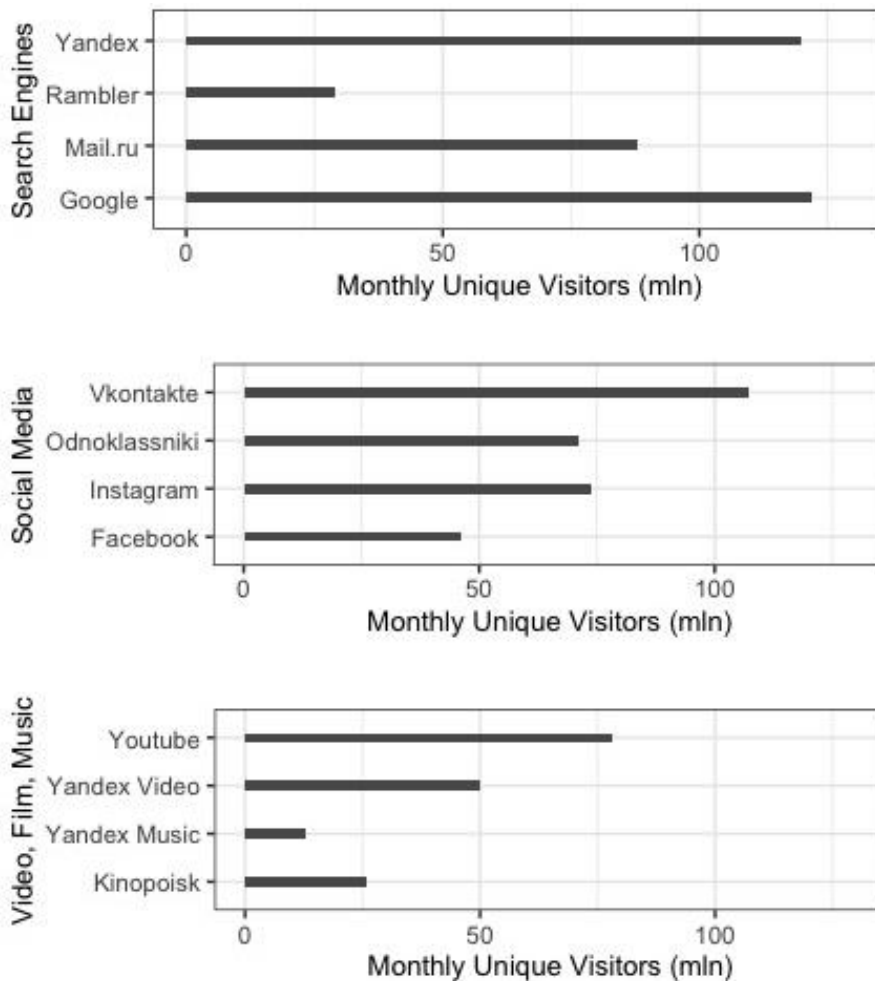
their counterparts living in bigger cities. People living in bigger cities are already quite digitalized.

Figure 11 Internet Usage and City Size (Mediascope, 2019d)



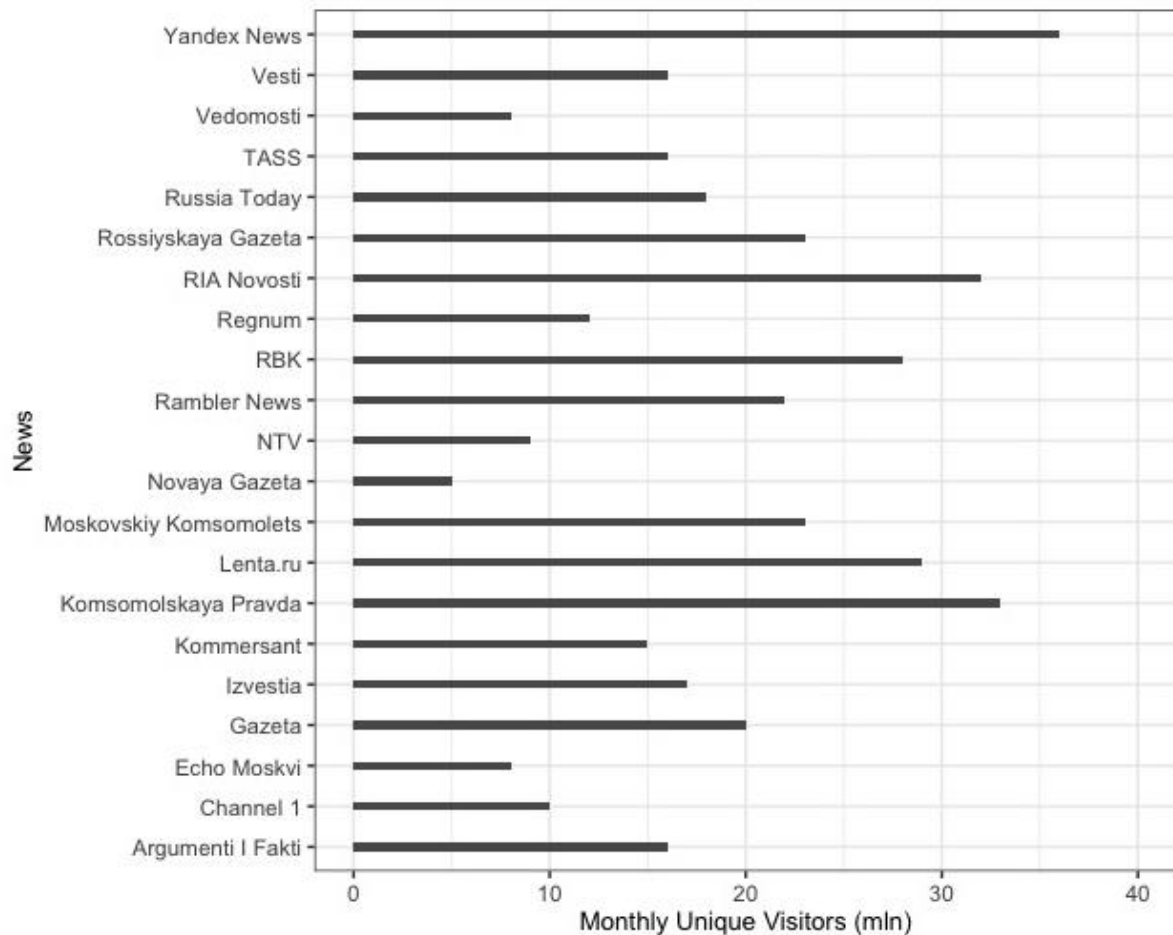
A wide variety of media content is available via the Internet. According to the automated Yandex Radar rating system (Yandex Radar, 2019), online preferences of Russian users can be ordered as follows: search engines, social media, video and audio content services, and news media. Being used for everyday life purposes, such as communication with friends and looking for information, search engines and social media constitute the most widely used digital media.

Figure 12 Preferences for Media Content (Yandex Radar, 2019)



Like television preferences, entertainment-related content trumps preferences for the news. The most widely-used media after utility- and communication-related social media and search engines are a variety of services used for watching videos and movies, looking and reading recommendations of movies, and listening to music. However, the news still enjoys considerable attention.

Figure 13 Preferences for News (Yandex Radar, 2019)



Russian news aggregator *Yandex News* outperforms any online news media. News aggregators *Rambler News* and *Mail News* lag far behind. The most popular news media outlets online are state aligned: *RIA Novosti*, *Lenta.ru*, *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*. However, some independent news media outlets also enjoy popularity. According to Russian pollster *Levada Center*, independent news media outlets are defined as those news media which “regularly publish viewpoints which differ from the official ones” expressed by the government, pro-government politicians, and covered in state-aligned media. Such news media as *RBK*, *Echo of Moscow*, *Vedomosti* fall within this category. The total audience of all independent news outlets in Russia is around 35%

of the population (Levada Center, 2019b). The websites of state-aligned TV channels, such as *RT*, *Channel One*, and *NTV*, are also widely popular.

The data on Internet access demonstrate that Russians are quite digitalized. They use the Internet for a variety of purposes. Some of them are unique for digital media, such as communication and searching for information. Some of them are similar to the rationale for watching television – the data suggest that other purposes are entertainment (music, videos, movies) and the news. The popularity of both television and digital media suggests there is a high degree of convergence (Jenkins, 2006). Television use and Internet use overlap: people consume entertainment content and watch news both on television and online. Moreover, while political content on television is strongly censored, digital media content is not. While the government attempts to constrain and censor online media, people still have access to a variety of viewpoints, both critical and supportive of the regime. This pattern provides an important context and background for the research on the reception of television. For those who consume both television and online news, the reception of television news is most likely to be mediated by online news consumption, and receiving online news is mediated by television news. These processes have to be considered in research on the reception of television news.

1.7. After 2014: The Russia-Ukraine Conflict and Russian Media

While the previous subsections described the general development, structure, contents, and audiences of offline and online Russian media, the start of the Russia-Ukraine conflict represented a tipping point in the evolution of the regime's strategies towards the media. Before 2014, television was the main vehicle delivering the regime's narratives, while the regime's attempts to control the online sphere were limited to imposing constraints. The state's attempts to use, rather than to constrain, new media to achieve strategic goals were present in Russia before. However, only after 2014, various new media and technology assisted information tools, such as social media, online new media, "troll" and "bots," were mobilized in a concerted fashion to promote the regime's agenda and to discredit opponents. The factor spurring this media mobilization was the deteriorating Russia-Ukraine relationship resulted from the Euromaidan protests and regime change. The regime had attempted

to manipulate both television and new media in a concerted fashion to achieve its strategic goals.

On one hand, Putin's regime has been intensively attempting to instrumentalize television. Although Russian TV was considered to be deviating from the ideals of objectivity and highly biased in favor of the president Putin before (e.g., Lipman, 2009; Oates & Lokot, 2013), the Russia-Ukraine conflict has elevated these concerns to a new level. Most of the TV programming in Russia is still diverse entertainment. However, the amount of coverage focused on Ukraine has dramatically increased, displacing other political content. In recent years, the news on the main Russian TV channels allocated almost one-third of their time to Ukraine. Their coverage can be characterized as inaccurate, lacking balance, and highly biased in favor of the regime's version of the conflict ("Messages of Russian TV", 2015). Russian TV uses confusion, disinformation (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014), and outright fake news (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016). In addition to news, political talk shows, once thought of as a dying genre, have become an important element of Russian TV programming. As Tolz and Teper (2018) argue, broadcasters' strategy during Putin's third presidential term represents a decisive break with the previous approach focusing on depolitization and infotainment. Instead, television channels have started to rely on what Tolz and Teper call *agitainment* – a format characterized by both a "drastic increase in ideological and political messaging displayed in the state – controlled media output" and a "systematic employment of specific global media formats to enhance its impact on viewers" which attempt to "appeal to less engaged and even skeptical viewers" (p. 1; p. 2).

The main topics covered during the conflict since 2014 are: the fighting and civilians, humanitarian aid, international politics and sanctions, and the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 in 2014. Russian media describe the conflict as a war, the rebels are sympathetically called "the people's militia" and described as a defense against the punishers from Kiev who are identified as a fascist threat spreading in Ukraine (Hansen, 2015). The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is framed as the struggle between Russian values and the West within Ukraine. The West is framed as a threat, strongly demonized (Nygren et al., 2018), and accused of pursuing hostile policies based on self-interest in Ukraine (Cottiero et al., 2015). These specific frames are a part of more general narrative accusing Western states of undermining the sovereignty of other states to achieve political goals (Hutchings & Szostek, 2015).

On the other hand, the regime has been trying to complement television with spreading its narratives across new media environment. Contemporary media environments in which digital media took hold are characterized by specific features which make active engagement with media, rather than constraining media, a more efficient strategy for authoritarian governments. Specifically, they are convergent and hybrid. In these environments, interactivity becomes the central principle, the boundaries between legacy media and new media and bottom-up agency and top-down control blur, and content flows across platforms (Jenkins, 2006; Chadwick, 2013). Although it is definitely “a significantly more difficult task than traditional propaganda carried out within a single authoritarian state that could control information flows” (Oates, 2014, p. 15), to an extent the Russian state managed to benefit from these features and harness the power of new media by being increasingly present in social media, exposing news aggregators and online news to political pressures, and creating its own online mouthpieces. Specifically, the regime actively co-opts the online sphere via several methods. It attempts to shape perceptions of the conflict by offering its own versions of events and reporting on controversial topics in Western countries, such as migration crisis, political correctness, and protests, in online news, such as online TV channel *RT* and online media outlet *Sputnik* (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014; Paul & Matthews, 2016; Yablokov, 2015). In addition, the regime actively circulates official discourses in social media (Suslov, 2014) and complements grassroots sentiments with paid “trolls” and automated bots which post comments favorable to Russia, criticize Western leaders, and move specific news stories up in the rankings of search engines (Linvil & Warren, 2018; Stukal et. al, 2017;).

1.8. The Limits of Media Control

The regime’s attempts to use a variety of media in a single mobilization effort have led many scholars to rely routinely on the concept of the information war which implies linear and direct influence spreading from Kremlin to state-aligned media, and from state-aligned media to both domestic and international audiences. The regime is thought to control both state-controlled broadcasting which affects domestic audiences and online news media, such as *RT*, which affect international audiences with the help of bots and “trolls” (e.g., Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014). However, there has been growing skepticism among scholars rejecting simplistic and outdated

assumptions of this concept. Scholars point out that even within a tightly controlled media sphere there is a place for journalistic autonomy.

There are several factors which set limits on the regime's control over media and its ability to propagate political narratives. As Egorov et al. (2009) show, the regime's ability to control media crucially depends on available resources. Even resource-rich autocrats cannot control the whole media sphere. Instead, they tend to be selective and capture only "commanding heights," such as national television channels (Gehlbach, 2010; Gehlbach & Sonin, 2014). However, even state-owned media allow for some degree of journalistic autonomy because state officials and media executives cannot micromanage all media production. For instance, Russian media executives often rely on journalists' good understanding of the "line," such as criticism of Putin and sensitive political issues, to ensure compliance (Oates, 2006). The content which does not cross this line, even coverage of social and political issues, is often left up to journalists' judgment and creativity (Koltsova, 2008; Schimpfossel & Yablokov, 2014).

The transnationalization and mediatization of Russian media in the recent decades further complicate the idea of linear and uniform control over media organizations implied in the concept of the information war. On one hand, the Russian media model is still a statist *commercialized* model (Vartanova, 2011) which makes it necessary for Russian media to compete for audiences. When intersected with global market imperatives, marketization forces journalists to comply with the standards of objectivity and impartiality even more as they have to compete in international, rather than only domestic, markets. On the other hand, the increasingly important digital media can additionally limit the regime's control over its narratives. For instance, Oates (2016) demonstrates the "trickle-up" effect during 2011-2012 cycle of protests in Russia. As online news media and citizens in social media reported on protests in a more truthful and realistic manner, this liberated commercial television to report on protests in a more truthful and realistic manner. In turn, even state-owned television channels had to adjust their reporting to compete for the viewers.

RT is an illustrative example because it has to compete in the global market and relies on social media presence more than other media. Several scholars show that both marketization and the participatory nature of social media set limits on RT's ability to deliver the regime's narratives to international audiences effectively. For instance, Tolz et al. (2020) show that to protect professional credibility in the global

media environment, *RT* journalists had to distance themselves from the line of the Russian regime in covering Skripal's poisoning. Some *RT* journalists even openly acknowledged the fact that the Kremlin could order the poisoning. Moreover, the interview of Margarita Simonyan with poisoning suspects Bashirov and Petrov – *RT*'s attempts to deny the accusations – failed and forced both *RT* and Channel One to ignore this interview altogether. Similarly, in the attempt to estimate *RT*'s audiences, Crilley et al. (2021) demonstrate that the majority of *RT* Twitter followers are interested in entertainment rather than politics. As a result, it is highly probable that they are attracted by *RT*'s nonpolitical entertainment videos and broadcasts which constitute the majority of its content in social media and YouTube (Mickiewicz, 2018), and *RT* itself is driven by market imperatives just as by political logic.

In short, the regime's attempts to use a variety of media in a single mobilization effort does not necessarily translate into real practices of journalists directly. As Hutchings argues, "official Russian media discourses do not come 'ready-made' for transmission. Instead, they are forged from a dynamic process of interaction between journalists, the Kremlin, and diverse popular and intellectual discourses. State-aligned television channels are as much actors within a global communications network whose information flows they both absorb and contribute to as they are Putin's dedicated propaganda storm-troopers" (Hutchings, 2018, para. 5). The interactions, negotiations, and fissures between these elements open space for journalistic autonomy, reinterpreting, and even challenging the regime's narratives.

1.9. Conclusion

This chapter has surveyed the major structural tendencies underlying the Russian media landscape in a chronological perspective. The transformations of the Russian post-Soviet media landscape can be described as several consecutive waves of glocalization. First, imported market media ownership structures were reassembled to be included in various oligarchic neopatrimonial pyramids and eventually, a single pyramid. The Russian media became instrumentalized by political and economic elites. Once the alternative centers of power were eliminated by Putin's regime in the early 2000s, so was the independence of the media and journalism. The last independent channel was taken over by the state in 2002. The second wave of glocalization included the introduction of digital television. Putin's regime could not

ignore the global digitalization of television because of its obvious technological and economic advantages. Neither could it embrace its full potential because of potential costs of losing grip on information space. As a result, digitalization was conducted in the predigital top-down fashion. Having full power over nationwide multiplexes, the regime could selectively digitize preferred channels while filtering unwanted ones which further strengthened control of the regime over television. The third wave of glocalization included the regime's managing of the growing spread of the Internet. Since the Internet did not present potential risks for the regime until the 2011-12 protest cycle, there were no incentives to create a comprehensive form of system control. After that, it was recognized both as an economic resource and as a technology facilitating political dissent. Since then, the regime has been exhibiting a divided approach to the Internet. While embracing its potential and facilitating its development for social and economic purposes, the government took a hard line over its political regulation via both legal and infrastructural control. In addition, after the start of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the regime also recognized its political potential. In addition to constraints, it was used as an instrument to compete in both domestic and international information spaces. However, the growing integration of Russian media in the global media market and the increased role of digital media still limit the regime's monopoly over media creating spaces for journalistic autonomy.

These circumstances led to the formation of an uneven media environment accommodating contradictory tendencies. Just as in other commercial market-oriented media models, Russian television produces a vast amount of entertainment content and relies on Western formats to satisfy the preferences of viewers and reflects some side-effects of commercialization, such as audience fragmentation and sensationalism. Unlike commercial market-oriented media models, Russian television includes a significant degree of centralized political control. Since television is controlled by the government in a centralized manner, the regime's narratives are present in both news and non-news entertainment content. Similarly, while being used primarily for entertainment, personal communication, and everyday life needs, digital media still provide political information. Online news media and news aggregators are widely popular and co-opted by the regime to spread the regime's narratives. While digital media still provide access to all types of views and information which can be found at will, one has to possess considerable interest and knowledge to look for them and make sense of the enormous amount of information.

Television and digital audiences partly reflect these patterns. While television audiences have been undergoing the process of fragmentation, central television channels still enjoy wide popularity among the audiences. While TV viewers are more interested in entertainment, they are still supplied with political information either in the form of highly popular news or non-news entertainment formats incorporating politics. Similarly, while digital audiences strongly gravitate towards entertainment, a number of popular online media and news aggregators supply them with political information. In addition, since many Russian TV viewers consume both television and online content, these patterns are likely to overlap leading to the mediation of television influence by online media and vice versa. These patterns provide an important background for further investigation of media reception of Russian TV viewers.

CHAPTER II. MEDIA, PSYCHOLOGY, AND INSTITUTIONS

2.1. Introduction

The Russian media environment is saturated by entertainment but used by the state to convey the regime's political narratives, television-centric but mediated by online communication, anti-Western in terms of its contents but Western in terms of its formats. Investigating news processing in such an environment would require an integrative theoretical lens and a well-calibrated method. This chapter attempts to find a robust theoretical ground for the analysis of news processing under an electoral authoritarian regime. Informed by the insights in cognitive, social, and political psychology, and political communication, this chapter presents several conceptual tools which proved to be reliable instruments in the analysis of complexities of news processing, such as the theory of media effects, the concept of heuristics, and the idea of high-choice media environments. After carefully reviewing the results of research and scholarly discussions in these three areas, I use them as a vantage point to review the results of the research on news processing under electoral authoritarian regimes and in Russian specifically. Applied to news processing under an electoral authoritarian regime, these three concepts serve as theoretical frameworks for three empirical chapters of the dissertation – the chapter on television news and political opinions (Chapter 4), the chapter on television news, heuristics, and credibility (Chapter 5), and the chapter on television news in a high-choice media environment (Chapter 6). In essence, I have attempted to understand how an electoral authoritarian regime and its institutions affect these three aspects of news reception. Although the design of this study is neither experimental nor comparative, metaphorically speaking, these three aspects – political opinions, heuristics, and news reception in a high-choice media environment– represent dependent variables. In turn, political regime and institutions represent independent variables which affect how people form political opinions, use heuristics to process news, and how political information from various sources, both offline and online, affects their opinions.

This chapter has four parts. 1) The first subsection reviews the literature on media influence and political opinions. After briefly touching on early propaganda theories and limited effects perspective, the subsection considers the two most influential contemporary traditions in the research on news – British cultural studies

and political communication. Focusing on political communication, I discuss three influential theories of media effects - agenda-setting, priming, and framing – and identify core memory structures which underline these effects – associative and schematic memory. Finally, I place these theories in a broader context of political environment and explain how news processing is connected with citizens' political engagement, and how political engagement is determined by political and media institutions. 2) The second subsection focuses on heuristics. After presenting the concepts of heuristics and cues, I identify the psychological foundations of this distinction - dual-process structure of cognition - and explain how heuristics and cues are connected with broader media and political environment. 3) The third subsection considers the research on the impact of high-choice media environments on political communication. After identifying psychological foundations of polarization, I consider three types of polarization in high-choice media environments – preference-based polarization, political polarization, and algorithmic polarization. Putting these three types of polarization in a broader context, I explain how they are connected with media and political environment. 4) Finally, the fourth subsection focuses on electoral authoritarian regimes and news processing under electoral authoritarian regimes. Synthesizing and integrating the results of research on news processing under electoral authoritarian regimes, I attempt to hypothesize how these three elements of news processing – the formation of political opinions based on the news, heuristics used to make sense of the news, and news reception in the high-choice media environment – work under an electoral authoritarian regime. This theoretical framework guides my analysis of data in three subsequent empirical chapters.

2.2. Media Effects and Political Opinions

2.2.1. A Very Brief History of Media Effects Research

The first theories explicitly dealing with the nature of media influence were a product of the 1930s. Then, the omnipresence of mass communication in politics and everyday life and the rise of totalitarian regimes seemed to prove the dramatic power of the media (McQuail, 2010). Many stimulus-response theories of media effects, such as the hypodermic needle and magic bullet models (e.g., Lasswell, 1927), were a product of this specific historical moment. In the post-World War II era, scholars responded to the earlier stimulus-response theories with skepticism and regarded

them as being relicts of the turbulent past. Experimenting with sophisticated methodology, Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues (Columbia School) pioneered an approach known as limited or minimal effects perspective (Katz et al., 1955; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944). As Berelson puts it, earlier propaganda theories were asking “by-and-large” questions. Yet, they are ill-suited for a scholarly analysis. A proper formula for scholarly analysis should focus on specific aspects of the process: “some kinds of communication on some kinds of issues, brought to the attention of some kinds of people under some kinds of conditions, have some kinds of effects” (Berelson, 1948, p. 172). Focusing on concrete rather than general questions, Columbia School made the first inquiry into the “black box” of media reception. Based on solid empirical analysis, Lazarsfeld and colleagues showed that the power of media effects is drastically overestimated. Media effects are strongly limited by many factors, such as citizens’ social networks and political partisanship (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944).

Shrugging off the spell of the “limited effects” perspective (Lang & Lang, 1981), the 1970s witnessed a new shift in media effects research. The arrival of television as a centralized mass communication system and new advances in psychology and communication research revived “the concept of powerful mass media” (Noelle-Neumann, 1973). It appeared that media effects are quite powerful rather than limited if one considers long-term change in attitudes, climates of opinion, ideology, and other issues which were beyond the Columbia School’s narrow focus on short-term changes in attitudes (McQuail, 2010, p. 473). This revived interest in the power of the media gave birth to an agenda-setting approach in political communication (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and encoding/decoding paradigm (Hall, 1973) in British cultural studies. The 1980s and early 1990s further extended political communication by introducing priming (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) and framing (Iyengar, 1994) models.

Some European scholars rejected the Columbia School’s positivist spin and proposed alternative semiology-inspired paradigm. Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall are credited with the founding of the British cultural Studies which focused on a broad array of culture-related topics, such as language, literature, race, and gender. Stuart Hall was specifically interested in media and television and proposed encoding/decoding paradigm as a part of broader agenda of cultural studies. Based on the Marxist analysis of class, ideology, and hegemony (Gramsci, 1971; Marx & Engels, 1845) as well as semiotic concepts of signified/signifier and denotation/connotation (Barthes, 1957; De Saussure, 1916), Hall (1973) introduced

the encoding/decoding paradigm for the analysis of media reception. According to this approach, media messages are encoded by communicators and decoded by audiences based on social, cultural, and political frameworks of knowledge. As a result, a message can have different meanings depending on particular frameworks on knowledge and should not be read literally. This semiotic nature of mediated communication opens space for alternative interpretations. While the creators of a message intend to deliver the “preferred meaning,” audiences have a certain degree of autonomy and can accept, reject or reinterpret it. Encoding/decoding a paradigm served as a theoretical basis for the empirical research of other scholars within British cultural studies. For instance, David Morley (1980) applied the encoding/decoding model as a part of a larger project, *The Nationwide*, and found that different types of media reception depend on different class positions. In sum, this neo-Marxist approach suggests that class affects media reception through culture.

2.2.2. Accessibility and Applicability Effects

While Hall rejected “the lingering behaviorism” (Hall, 1973, p. 5) of previous approaches, American media scholars continued to rely on it and cross-fertilized quantitative survey-based sociological research with experiment-based research in psychology leading to the formation of American political communication as it is known today. Although introduced quite a while ago, agenda-setting, priming, and framing still represent three of the more influential theories of media effects in political communication. Throughout almost 40 years, agenda-setting proved to be “one of the most robust theories, if not the most robust theory, in communication” (Ghanem et al., 2009, p. 516). It postulates a simple principle: “the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 177). McCombs and Shaw share skepticism of the Columbia school about the immense power of mass media and borrow Cohen’s statement that media “may not be successful much of the time in telling people *what to think*” (Cohen, 1967, p. 13). Yet, at the same time, comparing the emphasis Chapel Hill media put on particular issues of electoral campaign and voters’ emphasis on these issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), they find plausible evidence that media are “stunningly successful in telling its readers *what to think about*” (Cohen, 1967, p. 13). Agenda-setting theory posits that “media agenda and the public agenda correlate” (Ghanem et al., 2009, p. 517) or that there is “the transfer of salience from the mass

media's pictures of the world to those in our heads" (Ghanem & McCombs, 2001, p. 67). In sum, agenda-setting theory hypothesizes that news media determine the importance people assign to the issues on the public agenda by repeatedly emphasizing these issues and making them more easily retrievable from memory.

In contrast to agenda-setting, priming theorizes how media are "telling people what to think." In political communication literature, priming is defined as the process which "by calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged" (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p. 63). In the landmark study, Iyengar and Kinder tested priming effects experimentally. By showing newscasts emphasizing defense, inflation, energy or unemployment to subjects, they found correlations between the subjects' evaluation of the president's performance on these issues and the subjects' evaluation of the president's general performance. As they conclude,

When television news increases its coverage of a particular problem, viewers weigh their ratings of the president's performance on that problem more heavily (...) problems covered by television news become more accessible and therefore more important in the viewer's political calculus (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p. 70).

In sum, priming theory hypothesizes that by repeatedly emphasizing certain issues and making them more easily retrievable from memory, news media influence the standards used by people to evaluate governments, policies, and political issues.

Theories of media effects in political communication research do not form a logical evolutionary sequence. Unlike agenda-setting and priming models which development can be considered linear – the latter is based on the former – the idea of framing was omnipresent across different disciplines to be appropriated by political communication research in the 1980-90s. According to Entman (1991), frames are understood as structures which exists at different levels: "as mentally stored principles for information processing and as characteristics of the news text" (Entman, 1991, p. 7). At the cognitive level, frame is a cognitive schema or "a data-structure for representing a stereotyped situation" (Minsky, 1974, p. 1). At the level of news texts, frames are "easy-to-understand interpretative packages" (Kim et al., 2002, p. 8). As a cognitive media effect, the framing effect operates according to the principle which is qualitatively different from agenda-setting and priming effects. Agenda-setting and

priming effects appear when media repeatedly emphasize certain ideas in media making them more easily retrievable from memory and more likely to be used in rating importance of matters of public concern (agenda-setting) and evaluating leaders and policies (priming). Unlike agenda-setting and priming, the framing effect appears when frames in news resonate with cognitive schemas in memory. When the overlap between media message and existing knowledge is sufficient, the framing effect is likely to be triggered. The degree of fit between a news frame and the audience's cognitive schema determines whether this news frame affects the audience. As Cacciatore and colleagues argue, "the presence of a cognitive schema that matches the frame should produce a framing effect, whereas a mismatch between frame and schema should fail to produce such an effect" (Cacciatore et al. 2016, p.13)⁵.

From a psychological standpoint, agenda-setting and priming effects on one hand and framing effect on the other has been dubbed accessibility and applicability effects (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017). Both agenda-setting and priming are based on salience of issues and, consequently, on the same psychological effect: *accessibility*. When particular ideas are repeatedly emphasized in the media, they become more easily retrievable from memory, and therefore more likely to be used in rating importance of matters on public agenda (agenda-setting) or as benchmarks for evaluating political leaders, policies, and issues (priming) (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11). Due to this conceptual kinship, priming can be considered to be an extension, or second level, of agenda-setting theory (Ghanem et al., 2009; Ghanem & McCombs, 2001; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Weaver et al., 2004). While accessibility implies that more accessible ideas are more likely to be used in making judgments, the framing effect is based on a completely different effect: *applicability*. Instead of making certain ideas more easily retrieved from memory, applicability

refers to the relation between the features of some stored knowledge and the attended features of a stimuli (...). The greater is the overlap between the

⁵ It is important to emphasize the distinction between frames as structures within news texts and cognitive structures in memory. Framing analysis as analysis of media content ("the characteristics of news text") is very widespread in media research. As a result, it may create an impression that framing is the method of analysis of media content *only*. However, in research on media effects, the main conceptual heuristic is the frame as cognitive structure ("mentally stored principles for information processing") rather than rhetorical structure within news texts: e.g., Cacciatore et al., 2016; Scheufele, 2000; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017.

features of some stored knowledge and the attended features of a stimulus, the greater is the applicability of the knowledge to the stimulus and the greater is the likelihood that the knowledge will be activated in the presence of the stimulus (Higgins, 1996, p, 134).

In other words, rather than retrieving the most accessible ideas for interpreting media messages, framing operates “by invoking interpretative schemas that influence the interpretation of incoming information” (Scheufele, 2000, p. 309). The retrieved interpretative schema is applied to incoming information. By matching incoming information against the retrieved schema, one can interpret media messages through the schema. The message is then accepted if it fits the schema or rejected if it does not fit the schema.

Accessibility-based agenda-setting and priming and applicability-based framing represent the most influential theories of media effects in general and television influence in particular. However, to understand the media and television influence at a deeper level, it is necessary to consider the psychological structures underlying them. Accessibility and applicability effects are related to more general principles of organization of knowledge and memory. As Todorov, Chaiken and Henderson (2002) put it, accessibility and applicability are rules of knowledge activation. First, in order to be activated, knowledge should be *available*, i.e., stored in memory. Second, it should be *accessible* – when certain cues associated with stored knowledge appear in the environment, they increase the accessibility of this knowledge and its likelihood to be used. Finally, it should be *applicable* - i.e., appropriate and suitable for a given judgmental task. While availability is the foundation of any knowledge activation (it is not possible to activate particular knowledge if it is not present in memory), two other principles – accessibility and applicability – constitute key mechanisms for two types of memory and information processing – associative and schematic memory.

Accessibility-based associative models of memory information processing can be traced back to the British associationism (Carlston & Smith, 1996; Hume, [1739] 1978). Influential models of associative processing are developed by Quillian (Collins & Quillian, 1969; Quillian, 1967; Quillian, 1966), Collins and Loftus (Collins & Loftus, 1975), and Anderson (Anderson & Bower, 1972, 1974; Anderson, 1972). Associative models of memory posit that memory consists of interconnected concepts or nodes which are connected by associative links. Each node is related to a specific concept. Links between nodes have different “criterialities” representing importance of these

links for a particular concept (e.g., Quillian 1967; Collins & Quillian 1969). When a particular node is triggered, spreading activation triggers nearby connected nodes via associative pathways. Spreading activation leaves tags which make specific nodes more likely to be activated in the future (Collins & Loftus 1975).

Associative memory is an established theory which was tested through simulation and psychological experiment and further supported by evidence from neuroscience. For instance, Quillian (1967) and Anderson (1972) designed computer simulations to investigate human associative memory. When receiving input (concepts), these programs activate nodes one by one via spreading activation triggering the whole associative network. Quillian, Anderson and Bower complemented computer simulations with psychological experiments to investigate associative memory. These experiments operationalize the model of associative memory via measuring reaction time (Quillian, 1969) and the number of lists of words connected into one associative network (Anderson & Bower, 1972) to complement simulations. They confirm that human memory is structured as a network of associations. In addition, the findings in contemporary neuroscience suggest that associative memory can be a product of neuronal signaling and strengthening of synaptic connections. Neurons communicate via propagating electrochemical signals (action potentials - AP) within neuronal cells and chemical signals (neurotransmitters - NT) between neuronal cells via synapses. When a synapse is activated repeatedly, the connection becomes stronger via the process of long-term potentiation (LTP), and the signal between neurons is propagated easier (Nicholls et al., 2011). Hippocampus (HPC) is thought to be the main area involved in associative memory. It encodes information by forming associative connections which can last for days, weeks, and years forming memories (Abraham & Otani, 1991; Barnes, 1979; for review, see McNaughton & Morris, 1987; McNaughton & Nadel, 1990). The damage to HPC leads to inability to learn new associations and retrieve recently acquired memories (Kim & Fanselow, 1992; Scoville & Milner, 1957; Squire, 1981; Winocur, 1990; Zola-Morgan & Squire, 1990). If ideas in memory are equated with neurons, and associative connections with synapses, this model explains associative learning and memory. By learning something, human mind strengthens connections between particular concepts. Vice versa, by forgetting something, human mind weakens connections between particular concepts.

Associative models of memory shed light on the psychological and neural nature of the accessibility mechanism and effect. Theories of associative memory suggest that when activation spreads across a network, it leaves a “tag” at each node (or concept). These tags increase the likelihood that these concepts will be activated in the future (Collins & Loftus, 1975). These ideas seem to be further confirmed by neuroscience. For instance, scholars find that low frequency theta-burst stimulation (TBS) can function as a “primer.” It leaves activation tags in neurons by partly depolarizing them. Being partly depolarized, they are more likely to fire than other neurons (Larson & Munkácsy, 2015; Vertes, 2005). The model of associative memory and TBS explain how the accessibility effect works. By repeating certain information in the news, the media leave activation tags in respective neural networks. Therefore, when people encounter news, they rely on previously “tagged” networks of associations which are more accessible to be used in making sense of political information.

Unlike accessibility-based associative models, applicability-based schematic models of memory and information processing can be traced back to Kant’s transcendental a priori categories (Carlston & Smith, 1996; Kant, 1781). Influential models of schematic processing are developed by Bartlett (1932), Bransford & Franks (1971), Minsky (1974), and Anderson & Pichert (1978). Fiske and Taylor (1991) define schema as “a cognitive structure that represents knowledge about a concept or type of stimulus, including its attributes and the relations among those attributes (...) schemas are ways of talking about expectations and their effects.” Schemas “allow us the comforting sense that we understand our world” (p. 97-98). Schemas are categories used in social life. These categories are organized hierarchically – with more inclusive categories on the top and less inclusive categories at the bottom.

Like associative models, schematic models were tested through psychological experimentation and simulation and further supported by evidence from neuroscience. For instance, in one of the first studies of schema, Bartlett (1932) asked people to memorize a folktale. As time passed, subjects remembered only the general structure of the story, omitting and twisting details. These findings suggest that the schema has a holistic and active nature. People remember general impressions rather than details and apply schemas to construct, rather than reproduce, memories. Bransford and Franks (1971) and Anderson and Pichert (1978) tested schema theory in more rigorous experimental settings. After asking subjects to memorize information, they

found that people remember holistic and semantic representations of events rather than specific details, words, or information. Another influential implementation of schema theory is Shank and Abelson's (1977) script theory which simulates schematic memory. They simulate memory structures which condense complex situations with many causal connections into coherent scripts. For instance, a simple restaurant script – going to a restaurant, ordering food, paying and leaving – includes dozens of implicit details and causal connections which are not explicated. When activated, the machine can reconstruct specific details and connections based on the script. Schematic memory seems to involve two main areas of the brain: the hippocampus and the prefrontal cortex. While HPC forms associative connections, PFC integrates these associative connections, identifies commonalities across particular situations, and forms abstract schematic knowledge based on information first acquired via the hippocampus (McClelland et al., 1995; Moscovitch, 1997; Smith & DeCoster, 2000; Yassa & Reagh, 2013). Specifically, the ventromedial area of the prefrontal cortex (vmPFC) seems to be responsible for activation and deployment of schema. For instance, deploying a schema leads to activation in vmPFC (van Kesteren et al., 2010). People with damage to the vmPFC show reduced schematic memory as opposed to people with intact vmPFC (Spalding et al., 2015) and cannot detach themselves from concrete experience (Bertossi et al., 2016).

There are several important aspects of schema theory which make it important for news processing. First, schemas represent coherent abstract knowledge structures. When a schema is triggered, one can reconstruct particular details based on this knowledge. For instance, Minsky (1974) calls the key elements of schema “terminals.” Top terminals (essential elements of schema) are fixed, while bottom terminals (specific details) are flexible and filled with “default assignments.” Activating a schema of a social event (e.g., a street protest), one can infer specific details by filling bottom terminals with default assignments (e.g., crowds, speeches, chanting, police) without the need to actually perceive and encode this information (p. 1). Second, schemas develop with experience. Encountering similar situations, people extract essential abstract features of these situations to form schemas (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, p. 148). Finally, schemas allow schema-consistent information to be processed efficiently and resist schema-inconsistent information. As Fiske and Taylor (1991) argue, “encoding inconsistent information requires creating a compatible niche for it, whereas for consistent information the schema provides ready-made niche” (p. 129).

As a result, established schema “resist change and can even persist in the face of disconfirming evidence (...) when people with strong prior beliefs encounter mixed or inconclusive evidence, they may reinterpret the evidence as if it were firm support fit their schema” (p. 150).

The model of schematic memory explain how applicability effect works. While with the accessibility effect, people use the most easily retrievable mental constructs to process news media messages, the applicability effect relies on mobilization of coherent abstract schema rather than specific bits of knowledge and experience. Of course, schema should be accessible (it is not possible to use it otherwise). However, the message goes through a more rigorous matching procedure. If this matching procedure succeeds, the schema resonates with the message. If this matching procedure fails and the message contains schema-inconsistent information, the inertia and resilience of the schema encourages the individual to twist and reinterpret the message to make it consistent with the schema or reject disconfirming evidence altogether. While the models of associative and schematic memory explain the nature of news processing and the basic cognitive media effects, this distinction begs the question: why do some media messages result in accessibility effects, while others result in applicability effects? The next subsection reviews the research in cognitive and political psychology explaining the factors which lead to one or another type of media reception.

2.2.3. The Role of Political Engagement

Although associative and schematic models of memory explain two different modes of information processing and dealing with the news, they are not necessarily competing theories. Rather, they can be thought of as two branches of theories explaining different phenomena. What factors determine whether a person relies on accessibility and associative connections or on applicability and a schema to make sense of media and political information? The main factor which determines whether the individual relies on accessibility or applicability is thought to be the degree of sophistication in each respective area.

Cognitive psychologists argue that the difference between an associative network and a schema is in its coherence and richness. As Smith and Queller argue, “A schema can be conceptualized in associative terms as a set of units that are so strongly interlinked that activating any one of them necessarily activates them all”

(Smith & Queller, 2004, p. 21). Similarly, Carlston and Smith concur: “A schema can be viewed as a small chunk of associative network within which the nodes are particularly strongly linked, so that action of one tends to activate all the rest” (Carlston & Smith, 1996, p. 196). When one engages associative memory to process media information, the human mind scans the memory for helpful hints to make sense of this information. Those pieces of information which are associatively linked to a target stimulus appear “at the top of the head” and are used in information processing tasks. This mode of processing of information implies low engagement and familiarity with material. Otherwise, in addition to the most accessible ideas, memory would bring much more rich and detailed knowledge. When one engages schematic memory to process media information, human mind scans memory for schemas. Schemas represent much richer and more detailed knowledge. Since this knowledge is rich and detailed, the human mind is able to perform a matching procedure and see whether a stimulus matches a schema. In a nutshell, associative processing / schematic processing and accessibility / applicability effects represent a continuum from low engagement and knowledge of the issue to high engagement and rich knowledge of the issue.

The connection between the degree of sophistication of knowledge and accessibility / applicability distinction is mirrored in a wider debate on the structure of political attitudes and the role of knowledge in political information processing. This debate can be represented as a continuum which lies between two opposite views. The controversy was set off by Converse’s landmark study which showed that most people’s attitudes can be better characterized as “non-attitudes” rather than meaningful political attitudes. As a result of little interest in politics, their attitudes show no correspondence in time, and people seem to respond to survey questions at random (Converse, 1964). Re-evaluating Converse’s data, Achen (1975) proposed an opposite view. He offered a statistical model which showed that these fluctuations are a result of low reliability of surveys rather than “non-attitudes.” Most citizens have “true attitudes” - stable political attitudes - but they struggle to map them onto the vague language of survey questions. Within this continuum, there are two respective accessibility-based or applicability-based models theorising how knowledge affects political information processing.

Zaller (Zaller, 1992; Zaller & Feldman, 1992) offers an accessibility-based model of media and political information processing in order to integrate “non-

attitudes” and “true opinions” theories and build one of the most systematic models of media and political information processing. According to this view, citizens’ memory contains pools of internally conflicting considerations instead of “non attitudes” or “true opinions.” When they process political information, they sample the most accessible considerations in memory and use them to formulate opinions. When asked a question,

they call to mind as many of these ideas as are immediately accessible in memory and use them to make choices among the options offered to them. But they make these choices in great haste - typically on the basis of the one or perhaps two considerations that happen to be at the "top of the head" (Zaller, 1992, p. 36).

Engendered through an associative process, the networks of associations do not result in consistent opinions. People do not go through the complex work of integrating various considerations into consistent analytical schemes. As a result, their considerations are “typically rather poorly integrated” (p. 59). In addition, this model allows to connect political sophistication, accessibility effects, and political bias. While all people rely on the most accessible ideas to formulate opinions, with increased political engagement and awareness, their opinion pools become larger, more stable and crystallized. In addition, political sophisticates demonstrate significant political bias. They will have more considerations which favor their side rather than opposite side in their memory which results in politically biased opinion (Zaller, 1992).

Scholars leaning toward cognitive psychology borrow insights from schema theory and suggest an applicability-based model of media and political information processing. According to this view, accessibility is not enough to explain the effects of an increase in political knowledge. In addition, politically knowledgeable citizens form abstract political schemas based on political experience. These schemas are applied to incoming information resulting in a more efficient processing of schema-consistent information and rejection or reinterpretation of schema-inconsistent information. Based on psychological experiments, Fiske and colleagues (1990) found that a political schema crucially affects political information processing. People with higher political knowledge comprehend political information faster, better, and make decisions faster. Hamil and colleagues (1985) found that Americans use different schemas to process political information, such as the class schema, the partisan schema, and the ideological schema. These schemas have different levels of

efficiency in processing different types of political information, such as information about economic issues or complex abstract issues. In addition, they are strongly associated with interest in politics and political participation. As predicted by schema theory in cognitive psychology, political schemas are associated with bias. For instance, Lodge and Hamill (1986) show that partisan schematics (high level of political knowledge and interest) are able to classify public policies and recall them better than partisan aschematics (low level of political knowledge and interest). However, “they show clear evidence of stereotyping by remembering significantly more of the schematically consistent than inconsistent policy statements” (Lodge & Hamill, 1986, p. 518). In other words, what distinguishes political sophisticates is not only the size and consistency of their pools of considerations. These considerations also constitute abstract political schemas which make processing schema-consistent information more efficient and schema-inconsistent information difficult.

Taken together, these theories and findings suggest that political expertise affects media and political information processing. Political novices have little political knowledge and rely on the more accessible considerations to make sense of information. In other words, the memory of the political novice asks the question “how easily retrievable is a particular memory?” Since there are no overarching schemas which would integrate these considerations into a coherent whole and banish inconsistencies, their opinions are often contradictory and poorly integrated. Political sophisticates have more political knowledge and apply abstract political schemas to make sense of political information. In other words, when the memory of the political novice answers only the accessibility question “how easily retrievable is a particular memory?,” the memory of the political sophisticate answers the applicability question “does a particular memory fit encountered information?” Since there are overarching schemas which integrate their considerations into a coherent whole and banish inconsistencies, their opinions exhibit the opposite tendency: they tend to process information in a consistent and biased way.

While the degree of political sophistication determines whether interaction with the media results in associative or schematic processing, media and political information processing is not a purely intrinsic characteristic of the human mind. The way citizens acquire political information depends on the political environment. Different political and media systems can give citizens more or fewer incentives to engage with politics. Differences in political engagement across different institutional

designs can be identified according to the measures of political knowledge and voter turnout. Scholars find that less entertainment-dominated public broadcasting systems increase political knowledge by devoting more attention to public affairs and reaching disadvantaged groups more successfully due to the requirements of public findings. For instance, Curran et al. (2009) find that citizens in countries with public broadcasting systems (e.g., Denmark or Finland) are more politically informed than citizens of countries with dual systems (e.g., the UK) and much more politically informed than citizens of countries with market-based systems (e.g., the US). Essentially, public broadcasting systems decrease the cost of obtaining political information by paying more attention to public affairs and making news more accessible. Similarly, freer media systems increase political knowledge by providing easy access to diverse political information. For instance, Leeson (2008) found that citizens of countries where the government controls a larger share of media outlets and regulates media more are less politically knowledgeable than citizens of countries with freer media systems.

While it is inherently difficult to analyze differences in political knowledge meaningfully due to country-specific political contexts (Elff, 2009), differences in voter turnout present a less meaningful but more robust way to estimate political engagement across different institutional designs because it correlates with political knowledge (Delli Karpini & Keeter, 1996; Prior, 2005) and other types of civic engagement (Oser 2017; Werfel, 2017). Initially, differences in voter turnout across countries were primarily thought to result from differences in political attitudes which, in turn, are determined by different national political cultures (e.g., Almond & Verba, 1963). However, in recent decades, scholars have generated an extensive list of factors affecting voter turnout which fall under three categories: a) institutional factors; b) socio-demographic factors; and c) political or contextual factors (Eichhorn & Linhart, 2020; Geys, 2006). Seminal studies by Powell and Jackman show that institutional design is the most crucial factor which affects whether citizens perceive voting as meaningful. Powell (1986) finds that compulsory voting, less restrictive registration laws, competitiveness (the frequency of change of control over the national executive by a party or a coalition), proportionality of election system which increases influence of voters on policies, and the linkage between parties and social groups positively affect voter turnout. Jackman (1987) shows that in addition to the aforementioned factors unicameralism fosters turnout because it makes the impact of voters on

policies more direct, and multipartyism decreases turnout because elections in multiparty systems play a less decisive role in government formation. Conversely, violations of electoral integrity and corruption lead to distrust in the political system, make voting seem like a less meaningful act, and decrease incentives for voter turnout (Martinez i Coma & Trinh, 2016; Stockemer et al., 2012). Later on, the model of voter turnout was expanded to incorporate socio-demographic factors. For instance, Blais and Dobrzynska (1998) and Geys (2006) find that voter turnout is positively affected by GNP per capita, average life expectancy, degree of literacy, size, density, and homogeneity of the population as well as past turnout. Finally, Geys (2006) shows that contextual factors such as closeness of elections and campaign spending make voting seem to be a more meaningful act and foster turnout.

Overall, this list of factors can be reduced to the following mechanisms: 1) incentives which make voting *easier* and non-voting difficult as physical acts (compulsory voting, registration laws); 2) incentives which make voting seem more *meaningful* by increasing the perceived influence of an individual voter on policies and government formation (competitiveness, small number of parties, unicameralism, proportionality); 3) socio-demographic factors which satisfy citizens' basic needs and *predispose* them to voting (literacy, GNP, life expectancy, past turnout). As a result, citizens in economically and socially developed countries with more democratic institutional designs are more politically engaged which, turn, affect how they process political information.

2.3. News Processing and Cognitive Tools

2.3.1. Heuristics and Cues

In addition to media effects, the research on cues and heuristics is an important area in political communication. These concepts are based on the idea of “cognitive miser” in cognitive psychology which presupposes that people engage in the analysis of the messages only given sufficient motivation and resources (Todorov et al., 2002). In most cases, they rely on peripheral cues and heuristics to interpret information. *Peripheral cues* are any external cues which are not directly related to the content of the message but used as criteria for interpretation or evaluating credibility. *Heuristics* are rules-of-thumb triggered by cues which allow a conclusion to be arrived at, at no cost. Heuristics are based on prior experience, observations, and logic and constitute

simple logical rules, such as “experts can be trusted” and “if others think that the message is correct, it is likely to be correct” (Chaiken, 1987).

Scholars identify many peripheral cues which are used by individuals as triggers for heuristics. *Reputation* is one of the more important cues: individuals tend to trust reputable sources more regardless of the content of the message (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). *Character traits* is another important cue: many character traits, such as safety, qualification, dynamism, are used as cues to evaluate the trustworthiness of the message (Berlo et al., 1969). *Gender and age* are also commonly used cues: older age and male gender are typically used by audiences as source cues to establish the credibility of the message (Armstrong & McAdams, 2009; Wood, 1979). *Political cues* are extremely important type of cues. Political cues are used both to challenge the credibility of information if the source belongs to another part of the political spectrum (“hostile media phenomenon,” Baum & Gussin, 2008; Dalton et al., 1998; Vallone et al., 1985;) and to establish credibility if the source’s political alignment matches the perceivers’ ideologies (Nelson & Garst, 2005; Rahn, 1993;). *Social cues* are an important type of cue which guides message reception: people rely on the opinions of their friends and colleagues (Katz et al., 1955; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944) and even the mere presence of the reaction of others to the message allows individuals to arrive at a conclusion about the message (Axson et al., 1987). Finally, *visual cues* are an important type of cue. For instance, individuals interpret good-looking design of websites as a sign of their credibility. This heuristic becomes especially relevant in the online environment where individuals encounter tremendous amount of information. Relying on visual cues, users can reduce the number of websites they deal with and proceed with more content-oriented strategies of analysis focusing on a selected section of websites (Fogg et al., 2002). The heuristics triggered by these cues are all simple logical rules. For instance, the “professional look” of a website implies that it was made by professionals. Professionals are also good at providing high-quality information (Fogg et al., 2002, p. 25-26).

The individuals’ tendency to economize on effort invested in analyzing information and to rely on cues and heuristics is a part of more general psychological structure of human cognition. This structure is theorized by dual-process models of cognition. Various dual-process models of cognition differ in their detail (e.g., Chaiken, 1980, 1987; Cacioppo et al., 1986; Kahneman, 2003; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). However, they all have the same core idea. They all assume the existence of two

different routes of information processing. The operations of the first are “fast, automatic, effortless, associative, and often emotionally charged; they are also governed by habit” (Kahneman, 2003:1451). This system uses peripheral cues as information shortcuts and relies on heuristics to arrive at a conclusion, without investing many resources. By contrast, the operations of the second are “slower, serial, effortful, and deliberately controlled” (p. 1451). This system seeks accuracy, regardless of how time- and resource-intensive this may be. Smith and DeCoster (2000) provide an explanation for this differentiation. They argue that the foundation of this division is the existence of two distinct memory systems – the slow-learning and the fast-learning ones. This twofold structure is a response to a practical dilemma. Human beings have to be able to predict changes in the environment based on “the average, typical properties” and to acquire new information rapidly “so that a novel experience can be remembered after a single occurrence” (p. 109). These demands contradict each other. The knowledge of typical properties is abstract knowledge which emerges when the mind retrieves typical essential features from multiple encounters with unique specific situations. This process requires discarding memories about unique particular situations in favor of typical properties. At the same time, human beings have to remember novel unique experiences which contradicts the need to form abstract knowledge. As a result, cognition is divided into two systems which handle these tasks separately. The fast-learning systems acquire new memories about a unique situation. After similar situations are encountered many times, the mind retrieves typical features characterizing these situations and moves them to the slow-learning system.

The reliance on heuristics is a characteristic of the slow-learning system. The knowledge in the slow-learning system is the result of multiple encounters with some experience. For instance,

someone may have built up, over years of experience with persuasive messages, an association between statistical charts and graphs and validity of the message. If the person is now confronted with a message having these features, the message characteristics may automatically activate this long-term association, yielding an intuitive impression that the message is probably valid (p. 111).

The same rule explains heuristics and cues identified in political communication. If an individual encounters high-quality information from a source multiple times, the

reputation of this sources becomes a cue, and the association between reputation and quality becomes a heuristic which can be applied later. If high-quality visual design appears with high-quality information, one can scan websites for visual cues to infer credibility in the future.

2.3.2. The Role of Political and Media Institutions

The logic of economizing cognitive effort and relying on heuristics translates into the political world. In the contemporary world, people encounter more information than they can possibly use. Television, news, books, friends, websites, the surrounding environment and many other sources create an endless information flow. Due to the limits of human psychology, people are unlikely to consider all relevant information and perform complex analysis. As a result, they rely on heuristics. Essentially, heuristics are guesses which allow us to infer the quality of information based on certain external characteristics. These external characteristics may or may not be representative of quality of information which leads to mistakes and biases. To compensate for the superficial nature of these approximations, individuals rely on the structure of the environment (Gigerenzer & Todd, 2000). In shaping individual cognitive heuristics, they make use of political, media, and social institutions.

In political psychology, this intersection of institutions and individual heuristics is known as low-information rationality or “a method of combining, in an economical way, learning and information from past experiences, daily life, the media, and political campaigns” (Popkin 1994, p. 7). To compensate for the cognitive economy of judgment, individuals use various cues in the political environment as information shortcuts to achieve a sufficient level of accuracy and complexity of judgment. For instance, citizens can develop political identifications and use opinions of favorite parties and politicians as heuristics. If parties and politicians are seen as representing citizens’ interests, a party identification becomes an heuristic or “a substitute for more complete information about parties and candidates” (Popkin, 1994, p. 14). Once such identification is established, it eliminates the need to acquire more political information. One can use it to infer information about candidates’ positions and the content of policies (Popkin, 1994). There is no need for time-intensive investment in political learning when one can use a favorite party as a proxy to infer information about policies and issues. Similarly, reputation of media organizations also plays the role of such heuristics. If one trusts a media organization, the reputation of this organization

can be used as a proxy or a shortcut to evaluate credibility of news without investing much effort (Hovland & Weiss, 1954). In contemporary digital environments, endorsements and opinions on social media can serve as cues for heuristics. Relying on opinions of others and recommendations, users can evaluate the quality of information (Messing & Westwood, 2014; Metzger et al., 2010). As Landemore argues, “the average voter need not be that smart or informed if part of his direct environment—the media, political institutions, social norms – is smart for him” (Landemore, 2007, p. 23, 25).

Media systems and political systems can vary giving citizens more or less useful instruments to use as information shortcuts. For instance, market-based media systems, such as the ones in the U.S., France, Italy, are dominated by entertainment (Thussu, 2007) and prone to more polarized reporting (Stroud, 2011). The populations of countries with market-based media systems are characterized by lower level of political knowledge and more political polarization than the populations of countries with public broadcasting systems (Bos et al., 2016; Curan et al., 2009; Kobayashi, 2016). Polarization makes it harder to use reputation as a useful information shortcut. In polarized environments, individuals tend to use reputations of media sources as cues to see political bias even in balanced media coverage (Baum & Gussin, 2008). Similarly, political systems can vary giving citizens more or less useful instruments to use as heuristics. Even if competitive party systems are present in all democracies, those with more variety of parties provide more opportunities to find a party which better first one’s political preferences (Downs, 1957) increasing the chances of using political identification and party agendas as heuristics to infer information about politics (Popkin, 1994). However, while media and political systems form a continuum from more favorable conditions (public broadcasting system, diversity of parties) to less favorable conditions (market-based systems, two-party system) for low-information rationality, they still provide useful cues to navigate political information in varying degrees.

2.4. The High-Choice Media Environment and Polarization

2.4.1. Three Types of Polarization

In addition to media effects, cues and heuristics, high-choice media environments and polarization is another key area of research in political

communication. Similar to media effects, cues and heuristics, the issue of high-choice media environments and polarization is relatively unexplored in the contexts outside of Western democracies. At the same time, most other electoral authoritarian regimes are highly digitalized and have transitioned to high-choice media environments making the analysis of polarization related to digital media an important task. While “taming information tide” (Graber, 1988) has always been a central challenge to political information processing, the advent of high-choice media environments revitalized this problem. Since the number of information channels available has raised dramatically, today people have more opportunities to tailor their media diets to fit their political preferences. Specifically, scholars have been interested in three types of polarization: the growing divide between politically interested citizens and those who prefer entertainment (Prior, 2007), the formation of the homogeneous “echo chambers” in which one’s views are reinforced by the views of likeminded individuals (Sunstein, 2001), and the formation of personalized “filter bubbles” which are underlined by the algorithmic filtering of counter-attitudinal information (Pariser, 2011). While high-choice media environments are thought to polarize audiences through providing endless opportunities to customize media diets to fit one’s entertainment or political preferences, the very inclination to seek attitude-consistent information is a natural psychological tendency. The main mechanism which explains this tendency is the human mind striving for cognitive consistency. However, scholars have identified two distinct elements of this mechanism: the tendency to seek consistent information to avoid psychological discomfort and the tendency to economize cognitive effort (Stroud, 2017). While both elements seem similar (striving for consistency), they are related to different aspects of human cognition: emotion and cognition.

Known as selective exposure, the tendency to seek consistent information to avoid psychological discomfort has been studied since the early research at the Bureau of Social Applied Research (Columbia School). During 1940 U.S. electoral campaign, Lazarsfeld and colleagues discovered that 2/3 of voters consumed mostly propaganda from their own side, and only few voters had more balanced media diets. They concluded that this continuous flow of attitude-consistent information allowed a partisan to “reinterpret otherwise unsettling events and counter-arguments so that they do not leave him in an uncomfortable state of mental indecision and inconsistency” (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944, p. 87). Reevaluating earlier work by the Columbia School, Klapper divided this tendency into three parts: selective exposure (individuals choose

information which supports their opinions), selective perception (individuals interpret information in a manner consistent with their political beliefs), and selective retention (individuals remember information which matches their political beliefs) (Klapper, 1960). The psychological root of this process is cognitive dissonance first conceptualized by Festinger. In early experiments, Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) discovered that when there is an inconsistency between one's behavior and opinion, an individual tends to change opinion to eliminate this inconsistency. As Festinger argues,

The individual strives towards consistency within himself. His opinions and attitudes, for example, tend to exist in clusters that are internally consistent (...)

The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance (Festinger, 1957, p. 1,3).

The tendency to economize cognitive effort has been discovered later as a part of research on schema in cognitive psychology. Unlike striving for consistency to avoid psychological discomfort, this tendency has purely cognitive rather than emotional nature. Developing schema is a long and effortful process which is based on encountering multiple similar situations and extracting essential features from them (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, p. 148). As a result, the schema is a resilient structure which resists schema-inconsistent information. As Fiske and Taylor (1991) argue, "when people with strong prior beliefs encounter mixed or inconclusive evidence, they may reinterpret the evidence as if it were firm support for their schema" (p. 150). In short, people with developed schemas tend to understand some information better or ignore and misinterpret other information just because their prior knowledge makes it easier to process schema-consistent information rather than schema-inconsistent information (Lodge & Hamill, 1986).

2.4.2. The Role of Media Diversity

While the very inclination to seek attitude-consistent information is a natural psychological tendency, the advent of high-choice media environments providing endless opportunities to customize media diets to fit one's entertainment or political preferences aggravated this tendency leading to increased polarization. Increased polarization associated with the advent of new media, specifically cable channels, online news, social media, and news aggregators, has been at the center of scholarly

attention in recent decades. There are three types of polarization related to high-choice media environments: the growing divide between politically interested citizens and those who prefer entertainment (Prior, 2007), the formation of the homogeneous “echo chambers” where one’s views are reinforced by the views of likeminded individuals (Sunstein, 2001), and the formation of personalized “filter bubbles” which are underlined by the algorithmic filtering of counter-attitudinal information (Pariser, 2011).

Prior’s original research on the role of preference in a high-choice media environment is a landmark study which documented the growing divide between politically interested people and those who prefer entertainment which results from the increased availability of sources and varieties of information and entertainment. Based on extensive survey data, Prior demonstrates that access to cable television and the Internet widens the gaps in both political knowledge and political participation. The increased proliferation of sources of information makes preference, rather than access, a key predictor of political knowledge. As a result, the gap in political knowledge widens and deepens. Those who prefer entertainment completely disconnect from politics; those who prefer politics become even more politically knowledgeable and active (Prior, 2005, 2007). Overall, these results have been corroborated by many other studies. For instance, scholars have found that almost half of the U.S. population are “news-avoiders” (Edgerly, 2015; Ksiazek et al., 2010). Due to the development of new media, entertainment vs news polarization is growing across time. For instance, Strömbäck and colleagues have found that the proportion of both news-avoiders and news-seekers and the effect of political interest as a predictor of news consumption have increased for the past 25 years (Strömbäck et al., 2013). In addition, scholars find that the preference for entertainment content significantly decreases political knowledge (Yang & Lee, 2014), and preference for news increases political interest, political efficacy (Wolfsfeld et al., 2016) and political participation (Mosca & Quaranta, 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2018).

While high-choice media environments polarized the public across politics/entertainment lines, some scholars expected similar polarization across political lines. The idea of the increased political polarization resulting from the opportunity to tailor one’s media diet to individual political preferences was popularized as the concept of “echo chamber” introduced by the U.S. legal scholar Cass Sunstein (Sunstein, 2001) in the early 2000s. Echo chamber refers to a closure of a

communicative system when one's views are reinforced by views of likeminded individuals which potentially leads to the confirmation bias and political polarization. Sunstein argues that new media "are dramatically increasing people's ability to hear echoes of their own voices and wall themselves off from others." Enclosed in new media-fueled echo chambers, "diverse groups will tend to polarize in a way that can breed extremism, and even hatred and violence" (Sunstein, 2017, p. 59). Since the early 2000s, the idea of an echo chamber has become a popular concept valorized by journalists and presented as one of the fundamental threats to democracy. However, the research shows that this polarization is far from the closed communicative spaces reinforcing beliefs predicted by Sunstein.

Overall, scholars in political communication agree that high-choice media environments increase polarization, but this increase is moderate. Ideological segregation in consuming online news is slightly higher than in consuming offline news, but it is low in absolute terms and many times lower than face-to-face interactions with friends, family, and co-workers (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011). There are several reasons why political polarization related to high-choice media environments is not as strong as theorized by Sunstein. First, although laboratory studies demonstrate that people choose channels according to their political preferences (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009), this tendency is much less pronounced in real news consumption. For instance, scholars find that the audiences of different partisan cable channels significantly overlap. TV viewers consume politically diverse information (Stroud, 2011), and most Internet users share the same non-partisan channels and local newspapers in the U.S. (Weeks et al., 2016). In addition, some media systems, such as the public broadcasting system, significantly mitigate selective exposure and polarization exposing people to politically diverse information (Bos et al., 2016). Only small subsets of people with the most conservative diets are caught in ideologically homogeneous communicative spaces (Guess et al., 2018). Second, scholars find that earlier analysis of selective exposure overestimated the tendency to seek attitude-consistent information. Partisans are more likely to read news which is expected to be opinion-reinforcing. However, they do not try to avoid news which are expected to be opinion-challenging (Garrett, 2009). Third, there are many factors counter-balancing the tendency of individuals to seek opinion-reinforcing information in high-choice media environments. For instance, Dubois and Blanck find that political interest and diverse media diets protect people from being caught in "echo

chambers” in the U.K. (Dubois & Blank, 2018). Similarly, Messing and Westwood find that social endorsements on social media in the U.S. reduce the effect of partisan cues to the levels indistinguishable from chance. Partisans tend to read ideologically-consistent sources based on partisan cues. However, when news stories from the other part of the political spectrum are recommended by others, partisan cues have no effect (Messing & Westwood, 2014). In short, while high-choice media environments increase political polarization, this tendency is far from the formation of a set of closed “echo chambers.”

The further continuation of the idea of increased political polarization in high-choice media environment resulted in the concept of a personalized “filter bubble.” As an echo chamber, the filter bubble refers to the closure of communicative system when one’s views are reinforced by attitudinal information. However, the filter bubble is underlined by algorithms rather than by preference. Based on past search and clicking behavior, algorithms embedded in websites and social media guess what information a user would like to see and suggest it. In doing so, they filter other, potentially new or counter-attitudinal, information. The results are undermined creativity (filter bubbles prevent new information which is not related to previous web behavior from being found) and confirmation and reinforcement of political and cultural beliefs (filter bubbles prevent from encountering opinion-challenging information) (Pariser, 2011). The concept of the filter bubble has become extremely popular among journalists in the early 2010s.

Like the research on “echo chambers,” the existing evidence suggests that fears associated with the contribution of algorithmic personalization to the formation of close communities of like-minded individuals are mostly exaggerated. There are several reasons for the meager impact of algorithmic personalization on polarization. First, the effect of algorithmic personalization is often too weak to form a “filter bubble.” For instance, Haim and colleagues find that neither explicit (set by the consumer) nor implicit (based on algorithms’ observation of online behavior) personalization in Google News significantly affects source diversity (Haim et al., 2018). Second, scholars find that the vast majority of online news consumption mimics traditional news consumption. For instance, Flaxman and colleagues find that in the U.S., people keep visiting the websites of their favorite, typically mainstream, news sources negating the role of social media as intermediaries (Flaxman et al., 2016). Finally, algorithm-based media, such as social media and news aggregators, actually expose people to

oppositional perspectives. For instance, Fletcher and Nielsen find that the use of social media diversifies news repertoires of users in Italy, Australia, and the U.K. They call this phenomenon “automated serendipity.” Since users’ news repertoires are often quite narrow, algorithms regulating automated news selection increase the likelihood of incidental exposure to different news sources and prevent the formation of filter bubbles (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018).

Overall, the existing evidence suggests that diversification of media sources restructured media environment and created new opportunities for selective exposure and political polarization. However, high-choice media environments are far from complete fragmentation: both preference-based echo chamber and algorithm-based personalized filter bubble are too simplistic concepts. If a media system itself is diverse, this diversity counterbalances polarization, making the statements about “echo chambers” and “filter bubbles” into alarmist claims rather than accurate descriptions of reality. As Guess and colleagues argue, it is the public debate about the threat of polarization itself rather than most news consumers that “has become trapped in an echo chamber about echo chambers that resists corrections from more rigorous evidence” (Guess et al. 2018, p. 15).

2.5. News Processing and Political Regimes

News processing depends on political contexts. Political engagement varies across the population in every society. Only small minorities of citizens who lean towards politics due to motivation which originates in individual political socialization are ready to invest energy in searching for and analyzing political information (Prior, 2007). These people are less dependent on easily available information in mainstream media and political cues in the environment to analyze political information in the news. However, there is always a larger middle group which traditionally constitutes the main object of analysis of political psychology (Converse, 1964; Zaller, 1992). This group is especially dependent on the political environment in dealing with the news and politics. These citizens are interested in politics, but this interest is not enough to make them active information seekers without proper incentives and environment conducive for political learning. The way they make sense of news depends on whether they have proper *incentives*, or the perception that their involvement in politics can have tangible effects (Downs, 1957); cognitive *tools* or shortcuts to make sense of political

information without investing too much effort (Popkin, 1994); and *opportunities* or easy-to-use channels by which to acquire diverse political information without investing too much effort (Kobayashi, 2016; Leeson, 2008). Since political regimes vary in terms of incentives, heuristics, and opportunities for political learning, in order to fully understand the process of media and political information processing in authoritarian contexts, one has consider the structure of political regimes.

This subsection presents a review of the literature on the structure of electoral authoritarian political regimes and news processing in authoritarian contexts. I use the connection between news processing and the political environment as a lens to look at the research on news processing under electoral authoritarian regimes. Specifically, I look at how three connections described in the previous sections – the connection between media effects and political engagement, heuristics and media and political institutions, and increased polarization related to the advent of high-choice media environments – work in authoritarian environments. The subsection is structured as follows. First, I review the literature on authoritarian and electoral authoritarian regimes. Then I review the literature in three areas: 1) news processing, public opinion, and political engagement under electoral authoritarian regimes; 2) news processing, credibility, heuristics, and institutions under electoral authoritarian regimes; 3) the effect of high-choice media environments on political communication under electoral authoritarian regimes.

2.5.1. The Nature of Electoral Authoritarian Regimes

Scholars identify numerous criteria which distinguish democratic regimes from nondemocratic ones. Polity IV classified regimes as autocracies (Polity IV scores -10 to -6), anocracies (Polity IV scores -5 to 5) or democracies (Polity IV scores +6 to +10) based on competitiveness and openness of elections, constraints imposed on the executive branch of government, and the nature of political participation. Similarly, Freedom House classifies countries as “free” (Freedom House scores 1.0-2.5), “partly free” (Freedom House scores 3.0-5.0) or and “not free” (Freedom House scores 5.5-7.0) based on political rights (the quality of electoral process, political pluralism and participation, transparent and functioning government) and civil liberties (freedom of expression, associational rights, rule of law, individual rights). All these criteria can be reduced to the “procedural minimum” for democracy which includes: 1) free and fair competitive elections; 2) universal suffrage and 3) political and civil rights, such as

freedom of the press and associations, which insure effective and inclusive political participation; 4) elected officials' real authority to govern independently (Levitsky & Way, 2002).

While totalitarian or full-fledged authoritarian regimes like those existing in the 20th century are a rare commodity in contemporary politics, the regimes within this continuum which tend to violate one or more of these criteria are increasingly common today (Guriev & Treisman, 2019; Levitsky and Way, 2010). Since they can vary widely from a relatively closed hegemonic authoritarian regimes to more democratic-competitive forms which include significant elite pluralism, scholars have produced a wide variety of classifications to capture this variety of mixed regime types which combine democratic and authoritarian elements, such as “hybrid regimes” (Karl, 1995; Hale, 2010), “competitive authoritarianisms” (Levitskiy & Way, 2010), “electoral authoritarianisms” (Diamond, 2002), “informational autocracies” (Guriev & Treisman, 2019), and so on. A useful heuristic to meaningfully organize these “shades of gray” is the degree of competitiveness (Diamond, 2002). To capture this difference, Levitsky and Way (2010) distinguish between full authoritarianisms and competitive electoral authoritarianisms. In full authoritarianisms, the real channels for opposition to legally challenge the incumbent either do not exist or exist only on paper (e.g., China or Saudi Arabia). In contrast, such channels exist in competitive electoral authoritarianisms, but the incumbent manipulates media, judicial, and electoral process to create “an uneven playing field” which severely restricts an opposition’s chances to win in elections (e.g., Ukraine or Georgia). Furthermore, a relatively competitive authoritarian regime can slide into a more consolidated electoral authoritarian regime (e.g., Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan) which manipulates political participation, media freedom, and elections to the extent “that deprives elections of their primary functions of political choice and elite circulation, and reduces them to a mere tool of legitimisation and mobilisation of support” (Golosov, 2011, p. 623).

The attempts to manipulate elections and political participation are a logical result of the dilemma of electoral authoritarian regimes. On one hand, since there are no democratic institutions which guarantee that political actors can win an election in the future even if they lose it now, autocrats cannot afford to loosen their grip on power (Przeworski, 1991). On the other hand, electoral authoritarian regimes are unlikely to move towards fully-fledged totalitarianism for a variety of factors, such as the absence of cohesion within the members of the elite, weak repressive capacity (Linz, 2000),

and pressures mounted by other countries and international institutions (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Guriev & Treisman, 2019). As a result, electoral authoritarian regimes are caught in a deadlock of low-level equilibrium. The autocrats are fearful of violating the fragile low-level equilibrium more than they are of being in a coalition with potentially hostile competitors or choosing insufficient strategies of behavior (Gel'man, 2015). Being caught in this state, the members of elite deploy different strategies to balance multiple threats, such as the threat of disobedience of citizens and members of elite (Gel'man, 2015) as well as pressures mounted by the international community (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

First, electoral authoritarian regimes deploy a variety of strategies to undermine and change the function of elections with varying success. Elections in electoral authoritarian regimes are characterized by the uneven playing field which includes unequal access to media and financial resources (Levitsky & Way, 2010) as well as manipulation over judicial and electoral processes (Schedler, 2002). Instead of abandoning elections, autocrats tweak them to perform a number of useful functions. Elections are used to legitimize regimes; to monitor the attitudes of elites, members of state apparatus, and citizens (Gel'man, 2015); to reshuffle elite coalitions and redistribute resources; to demonstrate other elites that the regime possess massive resources and convince them to cooperate with it (Hale, 2015); to create democratic facades for the international community (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Second, electoral authoritarian regimes attempt to constrain uncontrolled political participation except for minimal participation in elections which is needed to generate legitimacy, monitor elites and citizens' preferences, and perform other functions mentioned above. In the seminal work, Linz (2000) introduced the distinction between totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. While totalitarian regimes encourage pro-regime mobilization through involvement of citizens in state-aligned political organizations, propaganda, and agitation (e.g., totalitarian or post-totalitarian Soviet Union, China or Cuba), authoritarian regimes rely on demobilization rather than mobilization. As Przeworski argues, the pace of (de)mobilization in authoritarian regimes depends on whether authoritarian equilibrium rests on "lies, fear, or economic prosperity" (Przeworski 1991, p. 58). While there can be mobilizational phases in the development of such regimes, tolerating or enforcing mobilizations is an exception rather than the rule for them because it can undermine the fragile authoritarian equilibrium (Linz, 2000). While autocracies vary in terms of political engagement of

citizens (Reutter, 2020), scholars demonstrate that mobilizing citizens outside of state-controlled elections is a risky strategy for autocrats. Mass mobilization can engage players with different political preferences in political process, generate instability, and supply citizens with collective action experience which can be used for further independent action. Thus, this strategy is more often used by the elites who lack resources for intra-elite bargaining rather than well-integrated members of the regime (Robertson, 2011).

Third, electoral authoritarian regimes constrain media freedom (Schedler, 2002). While authoritarian regimes can tolerate critical attitudes, they cannot afford the perception that there are alternatives to the regime (Przeworski, 1991). Since international linkages and integration into global markets significantly increase the cost of violence for electoral authoritarian regimes, they are reliant on control over the circulation of political information even more than the dictatorships of the past (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). However, due to limited resources, such regimes tend to capture only “commanding heights” - major national television networks - allowing for other forms of media (Egorov et al., 2009).

Finally, electoral authoritarian regimes tend to downplay ideologies. Since articulating ideological differences can be perceived as a threat by some members of the heterogeneous elites, autocrats often replace ideological differences with one-size-fits-all abstract ideas, such as human rights or nationalism (Linz, 2000). Unlike the totalitarian or post-totalitarian regimes of the 20th century which used comprehensive ideological doctrines to justify themselves and repression, most electoral authoritarian regimes tend to eschew ideology and imitate the rhetoric of democratic leaders by focusing on economic performance and provision of public goods (Guriev & Treisman, 2019).

Putin’s regime in Russia is a representative example of an electoral authoritarian regime. According to Polity IV, Russia is classified as anocracy (Polity IV score 4), while Freedom House classifies Russia as “not free” and “consolidated authoritarian regime” (Freedom House democracy score 1.39). Specifically, Putin’s regime embodies all these characteristics. First, it constrains elections and political participation. The regime relies on the excessive usage of patron-client networks and manipulation over judicial and electoral process to create “the uneven playing field, aimed at keeping incumbents in power regardless of voters’ preferences” (Gel’man, 2013, p. 4). While Russia regularly holds national elections at all levels, the regime

sets high entry barriers for participation in elections, monopolizes financial and media resources, and abuses bureaucratic apparatus to maximize votes (Gel'man, 2013). Electoral manipulation, such as direct falsification (Kalinin, 2017) and voter intimidation (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2018), are well-documented strategies of the regime. In addition, Putin's regime constraints political participation. The regime's attempt to mobilize citizens outside tightly controlled electoral participation are rare and tend "to be disproportionately exercised by elites who lack other forms of leverage in the struggle for resources" (Robertson, 2011, p. 34). The regime tends to stick to demobilization even in the relatively safe area of tightly controlled electoral participation. For instance, the 2016 Duma election was characterized by relatively little national and local campaigning and mean turnout of around 50% with historically low 32.7% in St. Petersburg. As McAllister and White (2017) show, the regime deliberately demobilized voters in key regions where electoral observers have easy access to polling stations and can document fraud (McAllister & White, 2017). The real turnout is probably even lower due to high rates of turnout falsification (Kalinin, 2017).

Second, the regime attempts to manipulate media to keep the incumbent in power and downplays ideology. For instance, according to Freedom House, Russia's rating for Internet freedom in 2020 is 30 ("not free") which places Russia on par with a number of authoritarian regimes, such as Kazakhstan (32), Saudi Arabia (26), Sudan (30), and the UAE (29). While originally Putin's regime tended to control only major television channels or "commanding heights" while allowing for other forms of media (Gehlbach, 2010), in the recent decade, the regime invested considerable resources in both restricting online freedom and shaping online discussions pro-actively (Oates, 2013). In addition, while some scholars claim that Russia recently undergone a conservative ideological transformation (e.g., Kolesnikov, 2015), this ideology is far from coherent political ideology. Rather, it resembles what Linz (2000) defined as mentality – a vague and amorphous system of attitudes which indiscriminately incorporates very general and internally inconsistent claims. As Guriev and Treisman (2019) show, Russia is like other "informational autocracies," such as Orban's Hungary and Chavez's Venezuela, who largely construct ideological frameworks by mimicking democratic leaders and appealing to economic performance, citizens' well-being, and public service provision.

2.5.2. News Processing Under Electoral Authoritarian Regimes

One of the features of electoral authoritarian regimes is restricted uncontrolled political participation. Restricted political participation has tangible effects on political psychology. Even in democracies people have no strong incentives to get political information. Strictly speaking, acquiring political information from a purely rational choice perspective is largely irrational because citizens understand that the effect of individual political decisions on the course of political life is very meager (Downs, 1957). However, different political systems can give citizens more or fewer incentives to engage with politics and acquire political information as the perception of the effect of individual influence on politics varies with different institutional designs. It is hard to compare how citizens acquire political information across countries directly due to differences in contexts. Political knowledge questions, such as those included in the surveys of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, have very low discrimination because particular items depend on country-specific political contexts and tap into different cognitive domains (Elff, 2009). Being a much less robust and indirect measure, voter turnout can still be tentatively used as a proxy to compare acquiring political information across countries because it correlates with both acquiring political information and political knowledge (Delli Karpini & Keeter, 1996; Prior, 2005) as well as other types of civic engagement (Oser 2017; Werfel 2017).

While voter turnout in democracies is dependent on a wide variety of individual factors, such political attitudes, socio-economic status, and education, scholars identify institutional design as a crucial factor which affects whether citizens perceive voting as meaningful. Many institutional factors can make voting to be seen as more meaningful act. For instance, the competitive nature of electoral districts increases voter turnout because a closer victory margin makes individual votes seem more important. Similarly, proportional systems provide more incentives to vote than majoritarian systems because citizens know that their votes translate directly into legislative seats and are not “wasted.” Likewise, unicameralism increases turnout by making perceived link between elections and legislation clearer thus communicating that each vote has more decisive impact on policy (Blais & Dobrzynska, 1998; Blais, 2006; Cancela & Geys, 2016; Eichhorn & Linhart, 2020; Geys, 2006; Jackman, 1987; Powell, 1986). Conversely, violations of electoral integrity and corruption lead to distrust in political system, make voting seem like a less meaningful act, and decrease

incentives for voter turnout (Martinez i Coma & Trinh, 2016; Stockemer et al., 2012). However, while political systems form a continuum from more favorable conditions to less favorable conditions in terms of incentives for political engagement, electoral authoritarian regimes are characterized by even less favorable conditions. Knowing that elections are tightly controlled, and the opportunities to affect the decisions of elites are strongly constrained, citizens have no incentives to increase the political information they have, or to vote.

The research on political engagement in electoral authoritarian regimes has yielded results which are in line with the tendency of such regimes to discourage political participation. Scholars find that some of the same institutional factors hold in electoral authoritarian regimes. For instance, both proportionality and closeness of election increase voter turnout in East European countries, democracies and nondemocracies alike (Kostadinova, 2003). However, voter turnout in electoral authoritarian regimes is generally lower than in democracies (Reuter, 2020), even though autocrats rely on coercion and material incentives, such as vote buying, intimidation, and threats, to mobilize voters for elections (Frye et al., 2019). For instance, since the low quality of governance which characterizes such regimes often results in ineffective reforms, a deteriorating economy disappoints voters, leading to reduced turnout (Kostadinova, 2003). In addition, scholars identify political corruption which underpins electoral authoritarian regimes as one of the major factors which negatively affect voter turnout.

Kostadinova (2009) found that initially political corruption in East European countries mobilizes citizens to vote to punish corrupt politicians in the short-term perspective, but eventually it makes them lose faith in the democratic process and decreases voter turnout. Simpson (2012) found that electoral manipulation significantly decreased voter turnout in Mexico, while electoral reform in the 1990s which made elections fairer significantly boosted turnout. Similarly, McAllister and White (2008) find that a significant share of the population voted “against all” (the option was removed in 2006) because of the absence of effective legal framework and meaningful alternatives in the State Duma election in 2003 in Russia. As demonstrated by McAllister (2017), electoral authoritarian regimes can deliberately demobilize voters in the areas where electoral observers have access to voting stations and can document falsifications. Finally, scholars identify the degree of political and electoral competition as a major factor affecting voter turnout. For instance, Turovsky and Korneeva (2018)

find that differences in turnout in the State Duma elections in 2011 and 2016 in Russia largely depended on the level of competition. Comparing competitive and uncompetitive elections in an electoral authoritarian regime in Zimbabwe, Croke et al. (2015) demonstrate that the absence of competition decreases voter turnout because citizens do not find elections meaningful and “choose to withdraw from the political sphere under electoral authoritarianism” (p. 3). Similarly, in a comparative analysis of 61 autocracies, Frantz (2018) found that the absence of opposition decreases voter turnout because those who oppose the regime are likely to abstain from voting.

While measurements of how citizens acquire political information and political knowledge across countries are problematic (Elff, 2009), some studies still suggest that citizens in electoral and closed authoritarian regimes are less politically knowledgeable and more politically apathetic. For instance, Leeson investigated the relationships between political participation, political knowledge, and media freedom across Central and Eastern European countries ranging from democracies (e.g., Slovenia) to electoral authoritarian regimes (e.g., Turkey). He found that low media freedom in less democratic countries makes citizens less politically knowledgeable and more politically apathetic (Leeson, 2008). Similarly, Zhang compares a democratic regime in Taiwan and an electoral authoritarian regime in Singapore. He found that despite very similar cultural profiles, citizens in democratic Taiwan have higher political interest, political efficacy, political participation, and more political discussions rather than citizens in authoritarian Singapore (Zhang, 2012). In a similar vein, Meyen and Schwer find that citizens gave little thought to political coverage in authoritarian GDR as media did little to reflect the problems of the country and did not touch upon their personal lives (Meyen & Schwer, 2007).

How do low political knowledge and engagement translate into processing news and political information under electoral authoritarian regimes? While existing studies have yielded rich results regarding the effects of state-controlled media on citizens under authoritarian regimes, scholars have been mostly focusing on how, why, and under what conditions citizens trust or distrust news and political information. For instance, scholars find that citizens in authoritarian regimes are often aware of media bias in television news (Gehlbach and Sonin, 2014). They can distrust state-aligned news media because they are perceived as biased due to a totalitarian past (Pjesivac et al., 2016), prior interactions with biased media (Truex, 2016), and bad quality of government which is associated with news media trust (Ursin, 2017). On the

other hand, scholars argue that a variety of factors contribute to high trust in news media under authoritarian regimes, such as weak democratic attitudes and identification with parties in power (Moehler & Singh, 2011) and the reliance on state-aligned media (Geddes and Zaller, 1989). In addition, authoritarian regimes can counteract citizens' distrust by employing intricate strategies, such as sophisticated messages which satisfy citizens' interest in real-life problems (Stockmann and Gallagher, 2011), pre-emptive coverage of significant social problems (Zhu et al., 2013), creative formats (Esarey et al., 2017), or allowing the media to criticize local authorities to let citizens 'blow off' steam (Chen, 2014).

Similar concerns have been guiding scholars of the Russian media. While regular public opinion polls show a close relationship between exposure to state-aligned media and susceptibility to regime narratives (e.g., Volkov, 2015), scholars report more ambivalent findings and diverge in their estimations of how much capacity and inclination Russian citizens have to interpret news critically under an electoral authoritarian regime. Some scholars show that the use of state-aligned sources, such as TV, increases the agreement with the official narrative of the state and vote for the party in power (Enikoplov et al., 2011; Szostek, 2017a; Sirotkina & Zavadskaya, 2020; Shirikov, 2021; White & Oates, 2003). Other scholars report that citizens are able to perform critical analysis of political information and identify political bias in news in Russia. While watching news which highlights only the benefits of particular policies, they can easily infer the costs of these policies based on their experience and education and see the attempt of the government to manipulate them (Mickiewicz, 2005; 2008). In addition, some scholars hypothesize that these contradicting reactions to the media can co-exist and propose explanations for this ambivalence. Citizens can be aware of manipulation but accept it as part of a state-building enterprise weary of economic and political turbulences (Oates, 2006); propaganda may both tap into citizens' patriotic feelings and simultaneously be countered by specific cultural legacies which make citizens critical toward media (Hutchings & Ryulova, 2009).

In essence, the findings of research on news processing in Russia can be put into three categories: 1) some scholars report that citizens trust news media, 2) some scholars report that citizens distrust news media, and 3) other scholars report that citizens have ambivalent attitudes to news media for a range of reasons. What is the reason for this divergence in estimations, and how capacity and inclination Russian citizens have to interpret news critically? While there are vast differences between

different studies in terms of methodology, research questions, research subjects, and time periods, some studies suggest that this variation can be partly attributed to the instability and contradictions which are inherent to the audience itself and caused by little interest in politics. While Mickiewicz (2005; 2008) shows that by and large Russian TV viewers are extremely efficient in processing news critically by mobilizing their experience, one of her findings stands out and suggests that this capacity depends on the nature of the issues covered. When dealing with issues which are relevant to viewers, such as economy, environment, corruption, or crime, TV viewers are highly efficient in approaching news critically. However, if asked to evaluate directly political issues such as elections, they cannot build bridges between issues and their experience. TV viewers report confusion and lack of trust and “talk about election stories only in terms of other election stories” because elections are “isolated from the richness of the experiences that figure so prominently in daily information processing” (Mickiewicz, 2008, p. 71, 78). Similar findings are acquired by several other scholars who tackle the connection between news processing, political engagement, and personal relevance in Russia. For instance, Toepfl (2013) conducted interviews with Russian students and found that citizens with low political knowledge and interest produce affirmative readings of *both* state-aligned TV broadcasts and oppositional blogs. Thus, they agree alternately with pro-regime and anti-regime narratives which are in contradiction with each other. Similarly, Savin et al. (2018) experimentally expose Russian citizens to positive and negative framing of Trump’s victory in the 2016 U.S. presidential election which was extensively covered by Russian state-aligned TV channels. They found that TV viewers are susceptible to counter framing and change their views of the Russian-American relations depending on the framing, and the effect is paradoxically stronger among those who watch news on state-owned TV-channels. They conclude that “the ‘inadvertent audience’ is not interested in politics enough to defend and reinforce pre-existing opinions, but is informed enough to be vulnerable to counterframing. Therefore, the counter-attitude treatment stimulates critical thinking and leads to an overcoming of the initial positive bias” (p. 5).

Taken together, these findings pose several questions which merit investigation vis-à-vis news reception among audiences. How do citizens process news under an electoral authoritarian regime? How do different degrees of political engagement translate into news processing under an electoral authoritarian regime? How does

news processing affect political opinions and perception of political issues under an electoral authoritarian regime? Chapter IV addresses these questions, using data from focus group discussions.

2.5.3. Heuristics and Cues Under Electoral Authoritarian Regimes

Another feature of electoral authoritarian regimes is the less independent status of media and political institutions. Just as political systems can give individuals more or fewer incentives to understand political information, media systems and political systems can vary by giving citizens useful instruments to use as cognitive heuristics. For instance, individuals tend to rely heavily on reputation as a cue to decide whether to trust a message regardless the content of the message (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). However, some characteristics of a media environment may prevent individuals from using such heuristics. Since market-based systems are dominated by entertainment (Stroud, 2011; Thussu, 2007), the populations of countries with market-based media systems are characterized by a lower level of political knowledge than the populations of countries with public broadcasting systems (Bos et al., 2016; Curan et al., 2009; Kobayashi, 2016). As a result, citizens may not encounter political information in the first place. In addition, market-based systems tend to be highly polarized. In polarized environments, individuals tend to use reputations of media sources as heuristics to see political bias even in balanced media coverage (Baum & Gussin, 2008). Similarly, political systems can vary giving citizens useful instruments to use as heuristics. Even if competitive party systems are present in all democracies, those with multiparty systems provide more opportunities to find a party which better first one's political preferences (Downs, 1957) increasing the chances of using political identification and party agendas as heuristics to infer information about politics (Popkin, 1994).

However, while political and media systems form a continuum from more favorable conditions to less favorable conditions for using the elements of the information environment as the basis for various heuristics for navigating political information, electoral authoritarian regimes are characterized by even less favorable conditions. Media in democracies are still exposed to a variety of political and economic pressures (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), but these pressures affect journalists through *indirect* mechanisms. For instance, media professionals can acquire political biases indirectly through socialization in media organizations (Breed, 1955). Similarly, news and political information in media can be biased because

journalists rely primarily on governmental sources as it is the easiest way to acquire pertinent information (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). They index sources and viewpoints according to the structure of the elite debate because elite debates and disagreements make good stories and, according to journalistic values, represent “important conflicts and struggles within the centers of power” (Bennet, 1990). As a result, the news in market-based democracies is often skewed in favor of powerful economic groups (Binderkratz et al., 2016) and presidential administrations, while networks of elites define news media agenda and frames (Entman, 2010). In authoritarian regimes, the *direct* control of the government over media is much more common. Governments often pressure media directly and make use of intricate persuasion strategies to manipulate public opinion (King et al., 2013; Sanovich et al., 2018; Yablokov, 2015). Since citizens can often identify media bias, they tend to distrust any news and political information. Persuasive skepticism towards news and political information is present in many authoritarian regimes, be it non-competitive authoritarian China (Truex, 2016), more competitive electoral authoritarianism in Russia (Mickiewicz, 2005; 2008) or competitive electoral authoritarianism in Ukraine (Szostek, 2018). Since reputation and other cognitive heuristics which are used to evaluate political information require some level of trust in media organizations, this profound distrust makes their usage less likely in authoritarian contexts.

Similarly, while political systems in democracies vary from less to more useful in terms of the usefulness of information shortcuts they provide, they still include a significant element of political competition and trust in electoral fairness. A competitive party system, the diversity of political forces, and trust in the electoral system are essential in aligning oneself with a party, an ideology, or a politician and using them as information shortcuts. In electoral authoritarian regimes, party systems are much more constrained, accompanied by a high degree of political corruption, and often reduced to a mere façade. Both low competitiveness (Croke et al., 2015; Frantz, 2018; Turovsky & Korneeva, 2018) and electoral fairness (Kostadionva, 2009; Martinez i Coma & Trinh, 2016; Simpser, 2012; Stockemer et al., 2012) reduce political engagement and parties seem untrustworthy so that citizens are less likely to consider them as institutional vehicles representing their interests or views. As a result, ideological and party identifications rarely work as meaningful heuristics for citizens under electoral authoritarian regimes. Instead, the struggle for or against a particular

regime or some other important identities often replace traditional left-right political identifications (Frye, 2019; Sirotkina & Zavadskaya, 2020; Wojcieszak et al., 2019).

Research on news processing, heuristics, and institutions under electoral authoritarian regimes is scarce. However, several studies have indirectly suggested that this distrust in the media and the political system affects cognitive heuristics used by citizens to process political information. Instead of the heuristics based on the political environment, such as opinions of parties and politicians or the reputation of media sources, citizens under authoritarian regimes are more prone to rely on alternative non-political sources of cognitive shortcuts. Several sources of cognitive shortcuts can be deduced from the existing literature.

1) *Source cues* appear to affect information processing under electoral authoritarian regimes. However, as parties and ideologies rarely represent real political cleavages in authoritarian contexts, the distinction between government supporters and government critics rather than between different party and ideological identifications is what affects political information processing. For instance, based on survey experiments, Shirikov found that source cues play an important role in processing news in Russia. People trust or distrust government-controlled and independent channels depending on whether they are supportive or critical of the government. However, the influence of source cues is mediated by education, political sophistication, and Internet use. In the case of people with less education, less political knowledge, or less frequent Internet access, source cues do not affect processing news at all (Shirikov, 2021).

2) *Personal experience* plays an important role in processing political information under electoral authoritarian regimes. Personal experience is a crucial factor which always mediates the processing of political information: people engage with information more intensively if they find it personally relevant and can build bridges between this information and their own cognitive schemata (Campbell et al., 1969; Graber, 1984). However, as political processes are often complex and unlikely to be experienced directly, political systems supply citizens with heuristics which can make up for the absence of direct experience with politics (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001). As political systems under electoral authoritarian regimes are rarely perceived as credible, the relative importance of personal experience as a source of heuristics for processing political information increases. For instance, scholars have found that citizens in China, Russia, Serbia, Macedonia, and Croatia prefer to rely on their own

experience, rather than the trustworthiness of media or political institutions, to make sense of news (Mickiewicz, 2005; Pjesivac et al., 2016; Truex, 2016). Although these three contexts are very different, they all share one feature. Media institutions in these countries are not perceived as being independent and objective due to the distrust left behind by oppressive institutions. In China, citizens know that the media represent the party line and rely on their own experience to “back out” political bias or discern truthful information even in slanted coverage (Truex, 2016). Similarly, scholars report that personal experience of interaction with phenomena such as ecology, crime, or economy, serves as a source of cues for evaluating overtly positive images of governmental policies in Russia, while the reputation of media sources or partisanship do little to help citizens make sense of political information (Mickiewicz, 2005).

3) *Abstract reasoning* acquired via socialization and education plays an important role in processing political information in electoral authoritarian regimes. Just as personal experience it is a crucial factor which always mediates the processing of political information: it increases the number and richness of schemata which are then used to encode new information (Hamil et al. 1985; Lodge & Hamil, 1986). However, it is especially important in the contexts in which the environment does not provide enough information and incentives to learn about politics. For instance, Grönlund and Milner (2006) found that processing political information is less contingent on education in proportional systems which provide more incentives to acquire more political information. In line with this logic, Mickiewicz found that citizens in Russia rely more on abstract reasoning rather than familiarity or experience with politics to identify bias and construct a more realistic understanding of policies (Mickiewicz, 2005). Similarly, Toepfl found that the cognitive maps Russians develop to understand, navigate, and critically evaluate political news play a more important role in the context of de-institutionalized politics and vague ideology (Toepfl, 2013).

4) *Communication with other people* plays an important role in processing political information in electoral authoritarian regimes. Communication with other people is an important source of heuristics and knowledge used to process political information (e.g., Huckfeldt, 2001). However, this source of heuristics is more important in authoritarian contexts due to distrust of media and political institutions. For instance, trying to adjust a low-information rationality model to authoritarian regimes, Kobayashi argues that “in countries where ideological dimensions are vague and the party system is too unstable to be used as heuristics, one’s interpersonal

network functions as an effective heuristic to fill political knowledge gaps” (Kobayashi, 2016, p. 5). Similarly, Oates and Smith suggest that “a wide range of evidence suggests that Russians continue to value personal sources of political information to complement the cacophony generated by the post-Soviet media environment and subsequent crackdown” (Smyth & Oates, 2015, p. 292 - 293).

As the functioning of low-information rationality in authoritarian contexts is largely an unaddressed issue in the scholarly debate, these findings pose several questions which merit investigation. How do citizens evaluate the credibility of political information under an electoral authoritarian regime? Do they rely on external cues, such as the reputation of media sources, party cues, and political affiliations, in the context of low trust in political and media institutions? If political and media institutions enjoy little trust, what are the alternative sources of cognitive heuristics which are used in processing political information? Chapter V addresses these questions by using data from focus group discussions.

2.5.4. High-Choice Media Environments Under Electoral Authoritarian Regimes

Just as different degrees of independence of media organizations and perceived integrity of political systems can affect citizens’ heuristics by offering them useful cues to navigate political information, the varying diversity of media content can affect citizens’ polarization. The abundance of media content increases polarization because citizens have opportunities to tailor their media diets to fit their preferences (Prior, 2007). However, the diversity of media content can counter-balance polarization because most people are not extreme partisans. They routinely consume media without a clear political agenda (Weeks et al., 2016), watch channels with different political agendas (Stroud, 2011), and consume diverse political information on social media (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). This diversity which prevents extreme polarization can vary across countries. True political diversity in polarized market-based systems, such as the U.S., is something of a myth. Market-based media systems are driven by profit more than other systems and tend to favor entertainment over politics, disregard local news and important social issues, and offer less diversity in news offerings. As a result, scholars are increasingly concerned with the control of corporations which can bias news and homogeneity of media content in general in market-based systems (Graber, 2015; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). In addition, as

there are no regulations to ensure political diversity, market-based systems are often highly polarized (Stroud, 2011; Thusu, 2007). On the contrary, public service media systems mitigate political polarization because they do not directly reflect partisan orientations and favor more neutral and diverse media content (Bos et al., 2016).

Under electoral authoritarian regimes, the diversity of media content heavily depends on the regime's resources and policies rather than market and corporate control. All authoritarian regimes attempt to control the circulation of political information (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). However, the media in some electoral authoritarian contexts can be more diverse than polarized market-based systems due to the absence of liberal-democratic consensus. For instance, Becker (2004) and Toepfl (2013) found that an important feature of "the media in hybrid regimes—and less so in more authoritarian states—may be that the ideological diversity of news content, somewhat paradoxically, exceeds that in most developed democratic societies" (Toepfl, 2013, p. 249). The degree of this diversity depends on different techniques of control which, in turn, depend on regimes' policies and available resources. For instance, Egorov et al. (2009) showed that resource-poor authoritarian regimes tend to accept the risk of public discontent and allow freer media because they need to monitor the performance of bureaucrats to detect policy failures. On the contrary, resource-rich authoritarian regimes tend to counter public discontent by censoring and restricting the media because they can draw on rich natural resources to compensate for policy failures. Due to similar resource limitations, electoral authoritarian regimes tend to invest in controlling the most important media selectively. As Gehlbach and Sonin argue, they tend to control "commanding heights" – major television networks – making allowances for other forms of media (Gehlbach, 2010; Gehlbach & Sonin, 2014).

Similarly, authoritarian regimes can choose very different approaches in dealing with digital media (Kalathil & Boas, 2003). Since digital media can challenge authoritarian rule by providing access to alternative sources of information, authoritarian regimes have been experimenting with the tools to control the online sphere (Greitens, 2013). Governments can simply limit citizens' access to information by blocking specific websites or even shutting down the Internet completely (Boas, 2006). In addition, they can target the online sphere rather than specific websites by enacting repressive legislation and establishing control over the Internet infrastructure (MacKinnon, 2011). However, in recent decades, resource-rich autocrats such as

Russia and China have invested considerable resources in more advanced techniques of control. For instance, the Chinese government continuously invests resources in censoring online content through paid 'Internet police' and legislation which force Internet companies to moderate online content (King et al., 2013; MacKinnon, 2011). Similarly, the Russian government has been experimenting with more advanced approaches to the Internet in order to shape public opinion (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010; Gunitsky, 2015). Putin's regime has been using digital media to propagate its narratives (Suslov, 2014; Yablokov, 2015), leak information to shape perceptions of politics (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2015), and discredit opponents (Oates, 2016). The use of paid commentators and bots has also become a popular strategy across resource-rich authoritarian regimes (King et al., 2013; Stukal et al., 2017).

Being a resource-rich electoral authoritarian regime, the Putin's regime has recently attempted to achieve full dominance over both broadcast television and digital media. While the regime captured "commanding heights" – major television networks – back in the early 2000s (Gehlbach, 2010; Lipman, 2009), recently it has been trying to use and co-opt a variety of new media to complement its "strategic narrative" (Miskimmon et al., 2013). To theorize how governments and political actors deal with war coverage during the era of new media, Hoskins and O'Loughlin introduced the concept of "the arrested war." Instead of simply constraining new media, in the era of new media, the elites actively embrace the power of new media and mobilize different types of media to achieve their ends. While this phenomenon is common in democracies, Hoskins and O'Loughlin consider Putin's regime strategy in managing media coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict as a prime and illustrative example of the arrested war (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2015). The regime has been trying to shape perceptions of the conflict by offering its own versions of events in online news, such as Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik, which propagate conspiracy theories and give voice to the far-right (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014; Yablokov, 2015). The regime engages grassroots sentiment via social media. For instance, Suslov found that after annexation of Crimea, social media facilitated access of official discourses to the popular imagination in Russia (Suslov, 2014, p. 604). Authentic public discussions in social media are complemented by paid "trolls" and automated bots. For instance, Linvill and Warren find about 1,300 accounts and about 2,000,000 tweets linked to the government-sponsored Internet Research Agency based in St. Petersburg which were used to attempt to influence public discussions on a variety of political issues in the U.S.

in 2015-2017 (Linville & Warren, 2020). Similarly, Stukal and colleagues found that in 2014 and 2015, between 40% and 80% of accounts tweeting about politics in the Russian Tweetersphere were automated bots which were used mainly to “promote specific news stories and news media in the rankings of search engines” (Stukal et al., 2017, p. 319).

In addition, the Russian government has been attempting to deploy more indirect forms of algorithmic control over media intermediaries, such as search engines and news aggregators. For instance, Sivets shows that the regime collaborates with Russian search engines *Yandex*, *Mail.ru*, and *Rambler* to label oppositional media and move them down in search (Sivets, 2018). Similarly, the government attempts to implement state control over content providers by making news aggregators bear legal responsibility for their content. According to a 2016 law, news aggregators are legally responsible for the incorrect information if sources they include in the news lists are not officially registered with Roskomnadzor. Although this law does not filter news aggregators’ content directly, it encourages them to include only news published by the media loyal to the regime (Daucé, 2017; Wijermars, 2018) similar to the “intermediary liability” exercised by the Chinese government which makes Internet companies responsible for censoring online content thus outsourcing the task of censorship (MacKinnon, 2011).

The Russian media sphere is far from complete homogenization. However, the degree of diversity in many state-aligned media decreases proportionally to the political nature of the covered issues. As Schimpfoss and Yablokov (2014) show, even journalists working on the state-controlled television channels exercise relative freedom in covering social and political issues unless they touch on sensitive issues, such as the criticism of Putin. As Oates argues, “There are three key points necessary to understand about the Russian media: There is a large amount of media diversity except on key political topics; the vast majority of the media do not challenge the state on these key political topics; and Russian audience members are enthusiastic consumers of media content. Thus, there is an appearance of media diversity, but little meaningful challenge to the regime” (Oates, 2016, p. 402). New media in the countries with electoral authoritarian regimes are as developed as in democracies, but electoral authoritarian regimes, especially in such resource-rich countries as Russia or China, implement stringent political control over both broadcasting television and new media. As the literature on media diversity, selective exposure, and political polarization in the

context of digital media in authoritarian contexts is scarce, these findings pose several questions which merit investigation. How do citizens make sense of the news under an electoral authoritarian regime which attempts to control different media sources simultaneously? Does this artificial homogeneity lead to political polarization? Is this polarization different from polarization in democracies which is based on the abundance of media choice (Prior, 2007), political preferences of citizens (Bennet & Iyengar, 2008), and the interaction between citizens' preferences and algorithms personalizing content to fit these preferences (Pariser, 2011)? Chapter VI addresses these questions by using data from focus group discussions.

CHAPTER III. RESEARCH DESIGN: THE ANALYSIS OF FOCUS GROUP DATA

This chapter calibrates the methodology to investigate the research questions and news processing in Russia. The chapter has the following structure. First, I discuss the focus group as a method and its advantages and shortcomings with special focus on political communication research. Second, I explain how focus groups were organized. Specifically, I briefly summarize news stories watched during focus group sessions, justify the choice, describe scenario and questionnaire used in the study, and explain how participants were recruited. Third, I describe participants' social profiles including socio-demographic characteristics, media diets, and political knowledge. Finally, I reflect on ethical issues in order to make sure that the study conforms to the ethical standards in social science research.

3.1. A Note on Method

To address the issue of news processing, I used focus group interviews as a method. Since the 1970s, the research in political communication has been underpinned by a methodological consensus treating quantitative methods, such as content analysis, survey, and experiment, as the only legitimate methodology. More recently, scholars have been arguing for the return to the mixed-method tradition and the approaches used by the founding fathers of political communication, such as Paul Lazarsfeld (Lazarsfeld et. al., 1944) and Kurt and Gladys Lang (Lang & Lang, 1968), and putting qualitative methodology back at the core of political communication research. As Karpf and colleagues argue, qualitative methodology is necessary to explore “*how* citizens, journalists, and political elites interact, experience, and engage in political communication” and “often excels at answering empirical questions that are a precondition for developing new theoretical understandings” (Karpf et al., 2015, p. 1890). As a part of this methodological shift, the focus group method has been widely used in the study of voting behavior (Kern & Just, 1995), political cognition and opinion formation (Andreouli & Nicholson, 2018; Gamson, 1992), news processing (Mickiewicz, 2008; Morley, 1980; Oates, 2006; Smoller, 1990), internet research (Metzger et al., 2010), and other research areas. The focus group method has a

number of strengths and limitations (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996).

On one hand, the focus group method has several methodological limitations which do not allow confident generalizations to be developed. Delli Carpini and Williams identified several problems typically occurring in the research based on focus groups: 1) the artificial setting makes participants behave differently than in natural settings; 2) focus groups include many participants, but the time for discussion is limited which does not allow for acquiring many details about single individuals; 3) it is possible that participants will conform to peer pressure; 4) focus groups do not allow researchers to identify causal relationships because they offer less control over variables and lack statistical procedures in contrast to experimental designs; 5) heterogenous data opens a wide space for interpretations and researcher's bias (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994). In addition, although pollsters attempt to provide a representative sample, their samples are limited by place of study, availability of participants, and participants' involvement in previous studies, and so are not fully representative⁶.

On the other hand, the focus group as a method also has strengths important for social science research. 1) The focus group method can provide enough depth in uncovering individuals' opinions. 2) Since the number of participants is usually up to twelve, the method allows the sample size to be increased significantly as compared to qualitative methods (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994; Lunt & Livingstone 1996). In addition, the focus group is an especially valuable method for political communication research. Three features make it a useful tool for scholars of media reception: it allows the form, language, and meaning structures of participants to be considered; it reveals the social nature of opinion formation; and it allows us to see how opinions are constructed on the fly.

Like interviews, the focus group method allows for consideration of the language and meaning structures of respondents. In the seminal study of news reception, Morley articulates methodological difference between focus group and quantitative methods typically used in media reception research:

⁶ According to pollsters' rules, a person who participated in a study cannot participate in the next one for some period of time.

The separation of the content (a 'Yes') from the form in which it is expressed (the actual words used by the respondent to formulate his/her answer) is a crucial mistake: for it is not simply the 'substance' of the answer which is important, it is also the form of its expression which constitutes its meaning; not simply the number of 'yesses' or 'noes' to particular questions (Morley, 1980, p. 152-153).

A confident "yes" will be very different from an unsure or sarcastic "yes." "Yesses" and "noes" can have different meanings. A "yes" can be a "no" under certain circumstances. The focus group method can allow scholars to investigate these "degrees of 'fit' between respondents' vocabularies and forms of speech and those of the media" (Morley, 1999, p. 154). As Morgan puts it, "[Focus groups] are useful when it comes to investigating what participants think, but they excel at uncovering why participants think as they do" (Morgan, 1988, p. 25).

Unlike interview and other individual methods, the focus group method considers the socially constructed nature of opinions. Researchers often ignore this social foundation of opinion formation. As Barber argues, what survey and experimental research treats as "public opinion" should be better termed "private opinion" (Barber, 1984; as cited in Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994). However, starting from the pivotal contribution of the Columbia School to communication research (e.g., Lazarsfeld, 1944), it is clear that people do not consume information and form opinions individually. Rather, the very process of opinion formation is social in nature.

As Morley demonstrates, individuals construct opinions and readings of news "through talk and the interchange" instead of being "the autonomous repositories of a fixed set of individual 'opinions' isolated from their social context" (Morley, 1980, p. 155). Similarly, Popkin shows that communication with other individuals is constitutive of the very process of opinion formation. People "triangulate and validate their opinions in conversations with people they trust and according to the opinions of national figures whose judgments and positions they have come to know" (Popkin, 1994, p. 7). Instead of silencing participants through peer pressure, as some critics assert, focus groups "can reveal inchoate attitudes that people are usually reluctant to express unless they are validated or reinforced by others" (p. 45)⁷ and "encourage participants to feel free

⁷ While peer pressure still remains an important limitation, participants' interest is a litmus test for distinguishing between forced and freely expressed opinions (Lunt & Livingstone 1996, p. 91).

from the constraints typical of one-to-one interviews” (Khan & Manderson, 1992, p. 57).

Finally, the focus group method can give access to the process of opinion formation. Political psychology demonstrates that people hold multiple opposing considerations in their memory, construct opinions “on the fly” (Zaller 1992, p. 1), and constantly update their attitudes when encountering new information (McGraw et al., 1990). While a survey would reduce these networks of conflicting considerations to one opinion, focus groups reveal “the process of opinion formation” and provide “glimpses of usually latent aspects of this process” (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994). An opinion registered by a survey is most often an ad hoc product. It is created from the materials at hand at a given moment. Revealing available materials and procedures which are used to create the opinion is often no less valuable than understanding the opinion itself.

3.2. Focus Group Design, Materials, Recruitment

To take into account language and meaning structures and reveal social and processual nature of the formation of opinions, focus groups are often structured as collective quasi-experiments. Scholars expose participants to a set of stimuli, such as video, visual or audial materials, and initiate collective discussions regarding these stimuli (e.g., Kern & Just, 1995). Following this logic, focus groups were structured around the news episodes. Focus groups were organized around the watching of three news episodes from *Channel One*.

Channel One is the most popular TV channel in Russia. According to Mediascope, Channel One broadcasts consistently attract the biggest national audiences (Mediascope, 2020). Although its popularity has significantly decreased compared to the previous years, 47% of Russians still watch *Channel One*. All other channels lag far behind (Levada Center, 2019b). It can be assumed that this channel and its news broadcasts are the most influential agents in shaping TV viewers’ understanding of politics. Although *Channel One* has a wide range of content, the most widespread and authoritative source of information for Russian citizens remains prime time news. Based on the research, I chose the news about three important events which were intensively covered by Russian TV news.

Specifically, Maidan protests in Kiev in November 2013 – February 2014, referenda in Donbass in May 2014, and military conflict in Donbass which started in March 2014 were the main issues on the agenda of Russian TV channels in 2014 (Lankina & Watanabe, 2017). After watching all the stories about these three events on *Channel One* prime time news in November – December 2013, May 2014 and June 2014, I selected three news broadcasts which represented the major tenets of the Kremlin's framing of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Russian media framed the protests as provoked and orchestrated by the West, described the conflict as a war and rebels as a defense against the punishers from Kiev who were identified as a fascist threat spreading in Ukraine (Cottiero et al., 2015; Nygren et al., 2018). All news reports were accessed via the *Channel One* website.

1. A news report about the Maidan protests in Kiev (4 minutes 38 seconds, aired on November 30, 2013). The video covers violent clashes between protesters and police on Maidan square, framing the event as unrest triggered by paid provocateurs and orchestrated by the West (the news story is presented as an example in Appendix A).
2. A news report about a referendum on the status of Donetsk Oblast (1 minute 10 seconds, aired on May 5, 2014). The video covers the peaceful referendum in Donetsk and features people expressing discontent with the Kyiv administration ruining the region's economy.
3. A news report about the military confrontation in Donetsk Oblast (12 minutes 57 seconds, aired on June 1, 2014). The video depicts the attack of the Ukrainian National Guard on Donetsk. It shows the Ukrainian military's use of artillery, aerial warfare, and indiscriminate fire, causing the death of civilians. Russia is depicted as providing humanitarian aid and asylum for the refugees.

The focus group scenario included several blocks of questions. After each video, questions were asked about the first impressions, emotions, and credibility of a screened news report. Then, questions about practices of watching TV and Internet usage in general were asked. The moderator was followed the scenario loosely and was encouraging participants to deviate and comment on others' experience. The duration of each focus group was 1.5 – 2 hours. The scenario can be found in

Appendix B. The focus group discussions were recorded on video camera and transcribed. The transcripts were coded via Atlas.TI. Repeating ideas and reaction to news reports were identified and united into more general topics (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

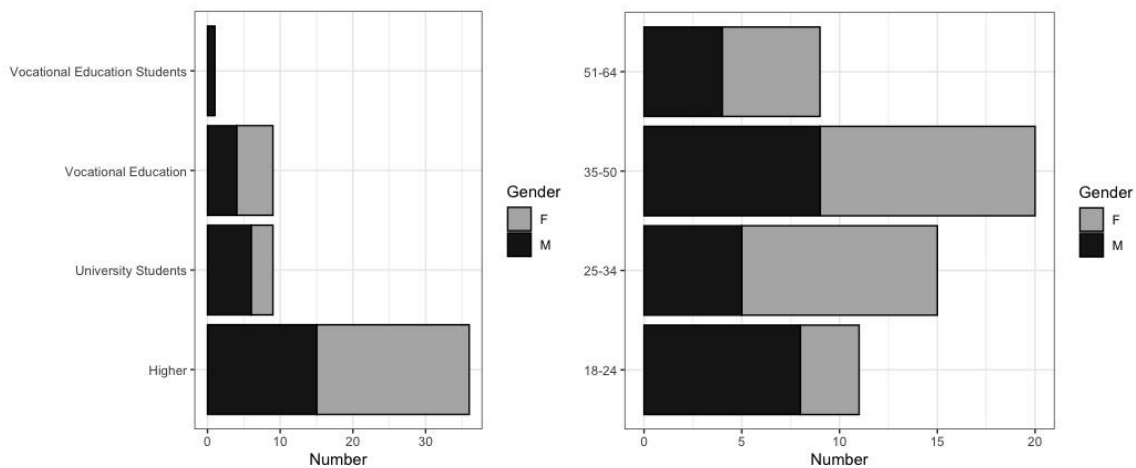
Several recruiters from Russian mass pollster Public Opinion Foundation recruited participants based on the sample used in representative surveys⁸. Both recruiters and participants were provided with a payment. The author also moderated focus groups. Four focus groups were conducted in St. Petersburg in 2016, and four in Moscow in 2017. Each focus group was diverse in terms of participants' economic status, education, and Internet use. Fifty-six people participated in the study. The list of participants with socio-demographic characteristics and information about media diets can be found in Appendix C. Participants were pre-screened to make sure they pay attention to TV news. Also, questions about political knowledge were asked. However, since it is not a quantitative study, they were designed to get additional contextual information about participants' attention to politics rather than to measure political knowledge. Hence, the questions were few. The questionnaire and results can be found in Appendix D.

3.3. Socio-demographic Profiles, Media Consumption, Political Knowledge

The socio-demographic data, watching habits, and Internet usage are summarized in the charts below. The full list of participants can be found in Appendix C. Participants are quite diverse in terms of age, gender, education, profession. Most of the participants are 35-50 years old, but other age groups are also present. Half of the participants are women, and half are man, but the sample is less balanced in terms of education. Most participants have a higher education degree, and some participants have a vocational education qualification or are college students, and only few are vocational school students.

⁸ The website of the organization is available at: <https://fom.ru>

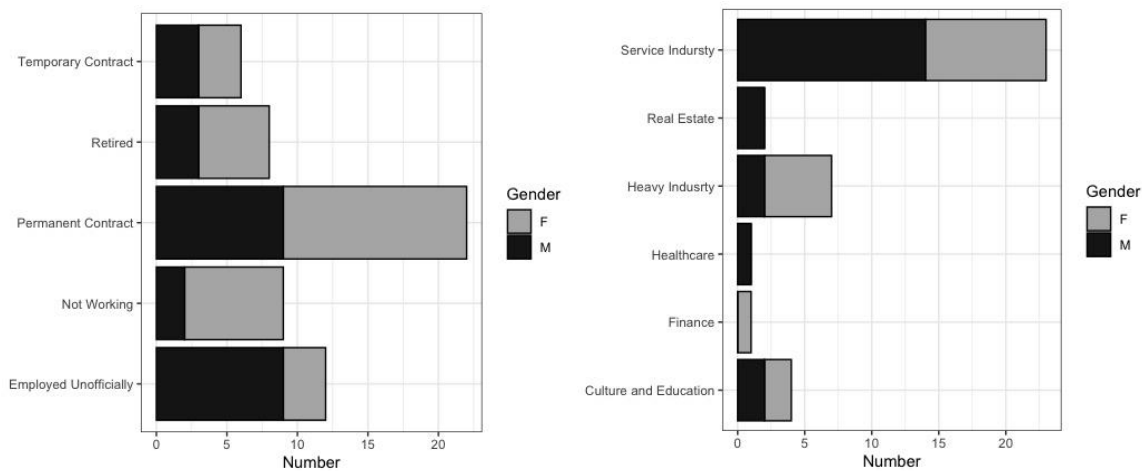
Figure 14 Gender, Age, Education



There are two reasons for this imbalance. On one hand, I included participants with completed and uncompleted higher education (university “dropouts”) in the same category. The number of schemas and abstract reasoning, rather than degrees, are important for the study of news processing and opinion formation. What makes people with higher education different is the advantage they have “in integrative reasoning, in abstract reasoning, and the ability to place observations within a society-wide context” (Mickiewicz, 2008, p. 197). Whether education is finished or unfinished is not important here. Even one year of college education increases dramatically the number of abstract schemas people can mobilize. On the other hand, the number of participants with higher education is also determined by the high number of Russians with higher education in general and in Moscow and St. Petersburg in particular. For instance, according to the OECD, 54% of 25-64-year-olds have higher education in Russia (OECD, 2015).

Most participants are employed, some are not employed for a range of reasons (unemployed, maternal leave, housewives, etc.) or retired. While people with quite diverse professions are present in the study (finance, real estate, healthcare, culture and education, industry), most participants work in services industries.

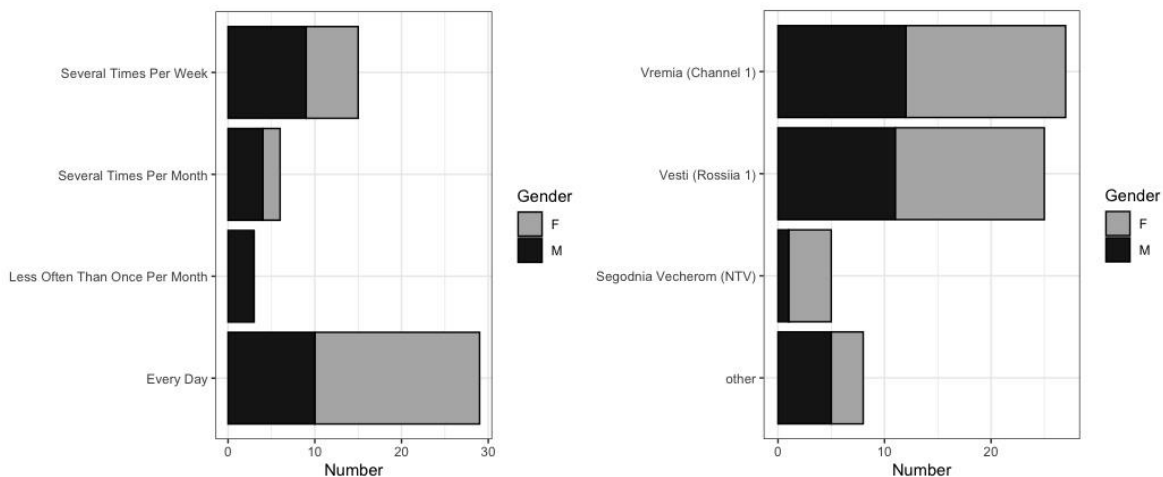
Figure 15 Employment and Profession



The overrepresentation of people employed in service industries is also a result of the structure of employment in Russia in general. 63% of Russians are employed in service industries (Plotnikov & Volkova, 2014).

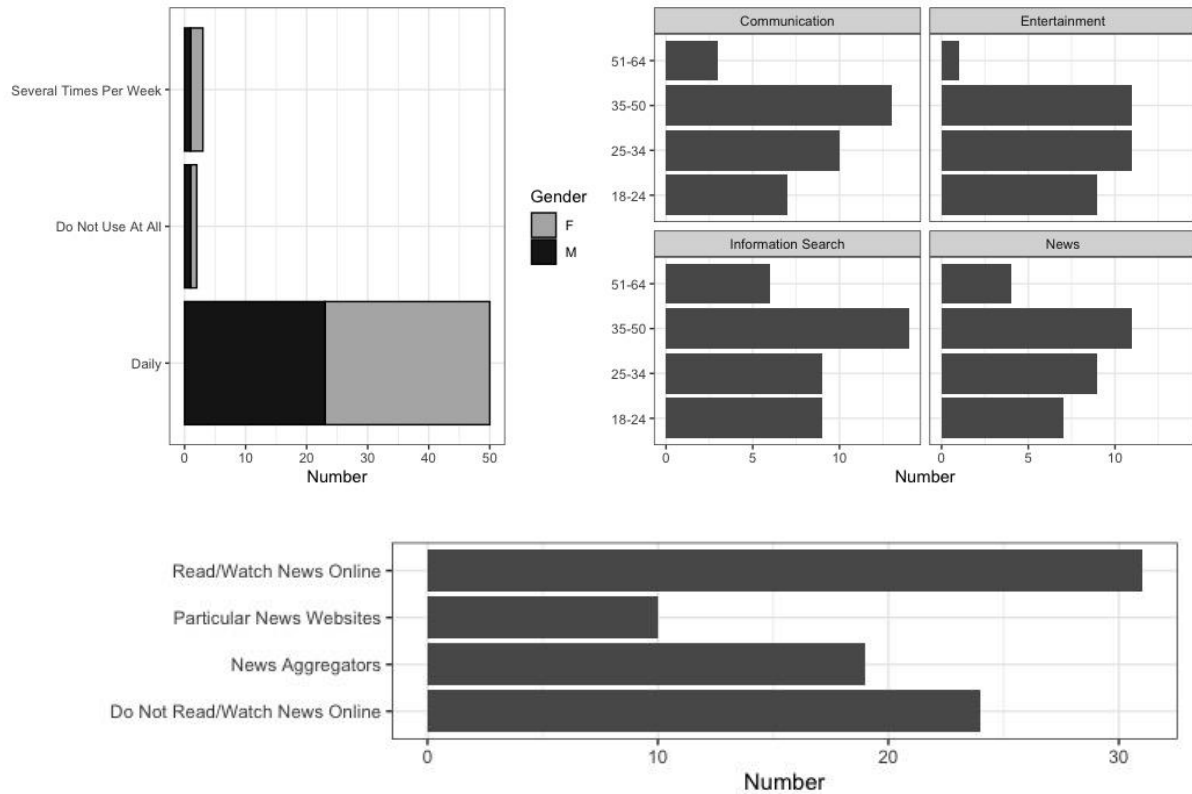
Most participants watch television and TV news. Their preference for television may be not representative of the general population: they were pre-screened to make sure that they pay at least some attention to TV news. The preference for TV news is higher among females than males. As is clear from the discussions, many women watch TV while cooking, taking care of children or doing housework - these activities are usually accompanied by a turned-on TV. In addition, some female participants are on maternity leave or are housewives, which increases their exposure to television and TV news. The most popular news broadcast among participants is *Vremia (Channel One)* followed by *Vesti (Rossia 1)* and *Segodnia Vecherom (NTV)*. However, these preferences are not exclusive – participants switch between different news broadcasts while watching TV.

Figure 16 Preference for TV News



Even older focus group participants are quite digitalized. Only two participants do not use the Internet at all. Most participants use the Internet for news, entertainment, communication, and information search.

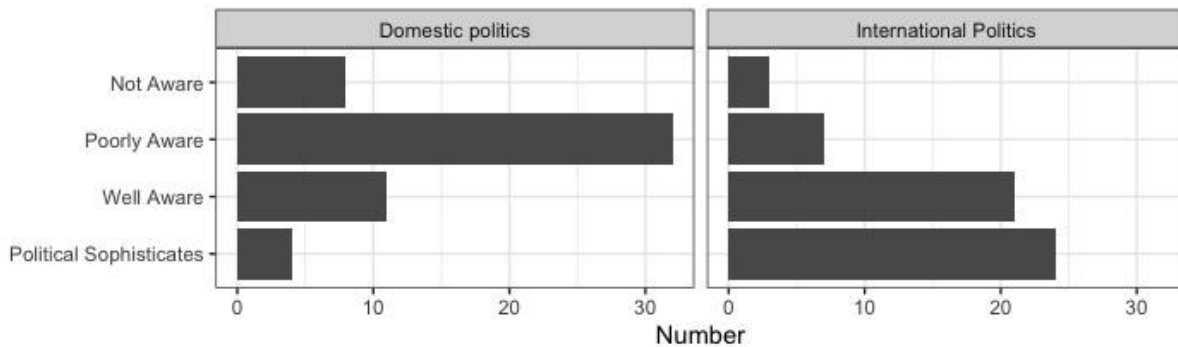
Figure 17 Internet Consumption



However, there are differences in the Internet usage related to age. Young and middle-aged participants use the Internet for entertainment more often. Practical information search and communication (mostly via social media) prevail in the middle-aged and older cohorts. This pattern seems to reflect the digital divide. Digital natives use the Internet for many purposes from childhood, while non-digital natives' use of the Internet is limited due to knowledge and skills. Half of the participants claim using the Internet for watching and reading news. However, when asked specifically about particular sources, most cannot remember particular sources or recall only few. Being less politically sophisticated, they rely on news aggregators and occasionally found news in their newsfeeds in social media.

The study also includes a political awareness test. However, since it is not a quantitative study, they were designed to get additional contextual information about participants' attention to politics rather than to measure political knowledge. Hence, the questions were few.

Figure 18 Political Knowledge



Participants are quite diverse in terms of their political awareness. As advised by political communication scholars (e.g., Deilli Carpini & Keeter, 1995), I used simple factual questions to specify their political awareness. Questions were dealing with three areas – the knowledge of domestic politics, the knowledge of foreign politics, and the ability to remember correctly political facts currently being discussed in the media (see Appendix D for details). The test shows that participants are mostly poorly informed about domestic politics. Since the Russian media agenda is mostly dominated by international politics, participants perform much better in the area of international politics. They are able to answer questions about NATO, the EU and other international political affairs.

3.3. Ethical Issues

Any study involving human subjects presents many ethical dilemmas. Since this study does not include experimentation on animal or human subjects, it cannot pose direct physical harm to participants. However, it touches on other ethical issues, such as participants' right to confidentiality and full understanding of the nature of the study. This study follows research ethics guidelines (European Commission, 2010) and conforms to the ethical standards outlined by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2012). In all focus groups, participants were informed about the nature of the study. They were told that they take part in the dissertation research focused on selective perception of news and agreed to participate in the study. They were informed that focus groups would be video- and audio-recorded, and recordings would be transcribed. They were informed that quotations from focus groups could be used in academic publications. The researcher guaranteed that all data would be anonymized and no information which could allow participants to be identified or would be available to any other people.

Studying perceptions of politics in an authoritarian context is associated with additional risks. Expressing political views can be risky in Russia. If these views are dissenting, touch on sensitive issues, such as criticism of the government or the annexation of Crimea, and attract the attention of the government, participants' well-being could be put at risk. Alas, there is no way to counter this risk except for full anonymity. To protect anonymity, participants were asked not to use their last names so that even the researcher would not have identifying information. In addition, all names in this dissertation and other articles have been changed. The data used in this dissertation and articles includes only quotations from participants' discussions and their choices in surveys focused on socio-demographic profiles, news consumption, and political knowledge. Video and audio recordings were transcribed and stored on a password-protected encrypted hard drive. No one except for the researcher has access to this data.

CHAPTER IV. TELEVISION AND POLITICAL OPINION UNDER AN ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter I have sought to address the first sub-question of this dissertation: How do citizens form opinions based on information from TV news under an electoral authoritarian regime? It presents the analysis of how Russian audiences make sense of TV news and articulate opinions about the Russia-Ukraine conflict, politics, media, and the governments, with a special focus on political engagement. In doing so, the chapter provides a better understanding of news processing in Russia in particular and some insight about the nature of news processing which is relevant for other electoral authoritarian regimes.

The research investigating news processing in both Russia and other electoral authoritarian regimes has yielded rich findings regarding the effects of state-controlled media on citizens. Scholars have mostly focused on how, why, and under what conditions citizens trust or distrust news under authoritarian regimes. For instance, citizens under authoritarian regimes can distrust news media because of poor quality of government (Ursin, 2017), previous experience with biased news (Truex, 2016) and oppressive institutions (Pjesivac et al. 2016), and crude forms of manipulation (Huang, 2018). On the other hand, the absence of democratic attitudes (Moehler & Singh, 2011) and the regimes' successful attempts to counteract criticism (Chen 2014; Esarey et al., 2017; Zhu et al. 2013) can make citizens trust state-aligned news media. Similar concerns have been guiding scholars of the Russian media. Some scholars report that the reliance on state-aligned media increases the agreement with the regime's narrative (e.g., Enikolopov et al., 2011; Szostek, 2017a; Sirotkina & Zavadskaya, 2020; White & Oates, 2003). Some scholars say that citizens are able to perform critical analysis of political information and identify political bias in news in Russia based on their personal experience or experience with politics (Mickiewicz, 2005; 2008; Toepfl, 2013; 2014). Other scholars report the ambiguity of attitudes to the media and politics: citizens can be aware of manipulation but accept it as part of a state-building enterprise weary of economic and political turbulence (Oates, 2006); propaganda may both tap into citizens' patriotic feelings and simultaneously be countered by specific cultural legacies which make citizens critical of the media

(Hutchings & Ryulova, 2009). However, the influence of political engagement on news processing has largely been outside the scope of analysis. This is a factor which crucially determines how citizens make sense of news in democracies (Lodge & Hamil, 1986; Zaller, 1992) and in authoritarian regimes alike (Leeson, 2008; Meyen & Schwer, 2007; Mickiewicz, 2008; Savin et al., 2018; Toepfl, 2013; Zhang, 2012;).

I have focused on the interplay between news processing, embedded psychological mechanisms underlying news processing, and TV viewers' motivation to obtain political information to address the issue of news processing under an electoral authoritarian regime. Drawing on the connections between accessibility and applicability as mechanisms for processing political information processing and TV viewers' motivation to obtain political information discussed in the theoretical chapter, this chapter presents the empirical analysis of TV viewers' reception of the Russia-Ukraine crisis. This analysis advances the first central argument of this dissertation. I rely on the assumption that citizens under an electoral authoritarian regime do not have proper incentives to obtain political information. At the same time, they live in an information-rich environment and are being bombarded with an astonishing amount of information. I argue that these processes result in a specific type of news processing. Dealing with large amounts of political information the best they can, TV viewers process the news by mobilizing the most accessible considerations. Lacking incentives to acquire political information, citizens cannot integrate critical and supportive reactions into coherent opinions. While citizens might be dissatisfied with life under an electoral authoritarian regime, they do not have incentives to substantively process political information and do not challenge authoritarian equilibrium due to being unable to articulate consistent opinions.

This chapter is structured as follows. I first present data from the focus group participants who did not have consistent political views. I reflect on their motivation to obtain political information and analyze seven contradictory thematic opinions they produced after watching news broadcasts. By tracing the origins of these opinions and demonstrating the contradictions between them, I show that they are underlined by an accessibility mechanism. The analysis of participants without consistent political views is followed by the analysis of participants with consistent political views. I reflect on their motivation to obtain political information and analyze the way they apply consistent schemas to process TV news and argue with other participants. By tracing how they deploy schemas to argue, reject, and reinterpret information, I show that the

way they make sense of TV news is based on applicability mechanism. Based on the analysis of this data, I have drawn more general conclusions: I reflect on limitations of data and explain how it contributes to the research on news processing in Russia and under other electoral authoritarian regimes.

4.2. Data from Focus Group Participants

The opinions of politically disengaged participants without consistent political views are coded as seven separate thematic categories. These opinions represent TV viewers' reactions to Russian politics and particular Kremlin policies. First comes the Kremlin's official narrative. When provided with cues from the Kremlin's official narrative or asked direct political questions, the participants essentially reproduced the Kremlin's official position. However, when the discussion is framed through their personal experience, the participants mention six diverse and critical sets of opinions. However, these groups are not exclusive and overlap. I analyzed each opinion to identify cues and contexts which directed discussion in a particular way and were likely to trigger particular opinions. I compared opinions of the same people to demonstrate that one person can hold poorly integrated considerations governed by accessibility. To demonstrate that the opinions of participants with consistent political views do not change across contexts, the analysis of the majority's shifting opinions is followed by an analysis of the opinions of the politically engaged minority with consistent political views who rely on applicability, in contrast to accessibility, to reinterpret information to fit their political schemas.

4.2.1. Politically Disengaged: Accessibility Effects

Most of the focus group participants have little motivation to learn about politics, despite discussing public matters with interest. Participants in this group do not use much energy looking for information. Except for television, participants of this group cannot remember particular sources, or at best, they can recall only a few. At the same time, they express negative attitudes to politics. Many of the participants in this group consider politics to be "the dirtiest business in the world" (Yurii). The theme of powerlessness often surfaces in the rhetoric of participants in this group. As Irina argues, "it does not make sense to try to figure out [the details of the Russia-Ukraine conflict] [...] what we see is the tip of the iceberg [...] To talk about it is to waste time."

Participants question their own abilities to understand the arrangements of post-Soviet politics and doubt their ability to influence the course of political life. In addition, the participants in this group scored poorly on the political knowledge test. Although the political awareness test included in this study gives only rough and superficial estimate, it brings some added contextual evidence. It shows that most participants are poorly aware of the current government and pay only scant attention to recent important events covered by both state-aligned and oppositional media. As a result, as described in the theoretical chapter of the dissertation, they relied on accessibility as a mechanism, used the most accessible ideas to make sense of the news, and expressed different opinions when new cues are introduced.

The Kremlin's Official Narrative on the Russia-Ukraine Conflict and Viewers' Reaction

In the context of superficial engagement with politics, it is logical that most participants rely on the most accessible ideas to process news and consequently have contradictory opinions. My data indicate that the same people can make contradictory statements at different moments during a focus group, depending on the cues used in the discussion. The first set of opinions is a reproduction of the Russian state's official narrative about the Russia-Ukraine conflict. It usually surfaces as a reaction to the news broadcasts themselves or through cues related to the official narratives that are introduced by the moderator or other participants. The statements below are a reaction to general questions about President Putin, the Russian/Ukrainian governments, the actions of the West, or to situations that some participants bring in as cues themselves. The official narrative on the conflict in Ukraine is a "strategic narrative": "a sequence of events and identities [...] through which political elites attempt to give determined meaning to past, present and future in order to achieve political objectives" and a "justification of policy objectives" (Miskimmon et al., 2013). There are three main rhetorical cornerstones of the Kremlin's official narrative: 1) U.S. policies to weaker countries generate instability; 2) these policies are illegitimate because other countries are not included in the decision-making process; 3) the EU is portrayed as a political formation that follows a course defined by the U.S. (Hutchings & Szostek, 2015, p.188). This discourse rests on the idea that Western states are hostile, and their self-interest lies behind the regime change in Kiev (Cottiero et al., 2015).

Most of the participants express opinions in line with this narrative. When cues from the official narrative are introduced into the discussion, TV viewers consider

Russia to be a peaceful and nonaggressive power. As Tatiana puts it, “I think that Russia has a very peaceful character.” Russia is constantly threatened by Western policies that are conducted through indirect channels, such as “orange revolutions.” “These technologies,” Sofia suggests, “led to [regime change in] the Middle East [and] Ukraine.” These revolutions threaten Russia’s integrity and control over the post-Soviet region. To prevent the loss of integrity, they should be countered. As Fedor puts it, “if we show weakness now, we will be beaten [...] Everybody [other countries] is waiting [for this]. That is why our army and fleet are our best friends.” On one hand, considering that the “real” problems of Russia are concentrated within the country, some TV viewers think that the media does not have a reason to lie about international developments, and only falsifies information about domestic developments. As Mikhail puts it, “we do not need to falsify information about what is going on abroad. Here [in Russia] they [journalists] can falsify. But Russia is not doing bad things in international relations.” On the other hand, other viewers think that manipulation is “appropriate” in a hostile environment. The media attempts to elicit “a rejection [of the Ukrainian regime] [...] We are right. They are villains—they kill our people” (Fedor). These actions are deemed to be “justified” because it is important to foster patriotism in a hostile environment. As Tatiana argues, “news has raised the spirit of patriotism” (Tatiana). These reactions generally mirror the Kremlin’s interpretation of Russia-Ukraine conflict which is widely distributed over television, state-aligned online media, and among government supporters.

Emotional Burnout

When not relying on cues from the official narrative that help them to make sense of the news, participants often referred to the topic of emotional burnout. Half of the participants referred to the topic of emotional burnout. This theme is triggered by personal questions, such as queries about their emotional reactions to TV news about Ukraine and changes in their practices of watching the news since the beginning of the conflict. This reference to their experience of watching functions as a cue that helps them to interpret the TV news as an attempt to manipulate them.

Most viewers indicate that during the conflict they significantly decreased their watching of the news. Coverage of Ukraine typically includes a lot of violent scenes and broadly portrays human suffering. The most emphatic reactions to the extreme character of the coverage often involved bodily metaphors, such as “our eyes are

bleeding” (Alexandr), “my body cannot handle it” (Galina), “my brain just got tired of it [such news] every day” (Vasilii), “my nerves cannot stand it [...] my blood pressure rises when I watch the news” (Galina), “I have a headache” (Alexander). Viewers responded to such coverage by watching less news about the Russia-Ukraine conflict. As Diana states, “I just turn it off. Can’t watch it.” In addition to very emotionally charged discourse expressing conflicted emotions, viewers tend to turn from emotional reactions to a more general criticism of the way the media operates. As Nina puts it, “for what purpose do they have all these negative emotions? You turn it on, and you get sick. Why? Deliberate propaganda.” As a result, viewers feel openly manipulated. When speaking of manipulation, viewers turn to a discussion of the one-sided character of the coverage. As Leonid puts it, “no two-sided analysis.” Boris proceeds: “[You] trust it less [...] so as] not to fool yourself,” because it is “not objective.”

When not provided with cues from the official narrative and not asked to reflect on more general political issues, TV viewers discuss the news differently. In the absence of the official “passwords” to decipher TV news, they use the emotionality as a cue to interpret TV news. This emotionality immediately activates a defensive mechanism or “persuasive intent” heuristic – the rule of thumb which dictates that information which includes some ulterior motive cannot be trusted and is used for manipulation (Metzger et al., 2010). As a result, they shift from discussion emotions to discussing the biased character of the news, drawing the conclusion that the news is being used to manipulate them.

Reading Between the Lines

Reading Between the Lines is one of the common explanations of the critical attitude of the Soviet and post-Soviet TV viewers. This explanation suggests that adapting to a steady flow of unrealistically positive images of the country’s prosperity and criticism of the Western countries, Soviet viewers acquired a critical skill to identify the bits of truth in propagandistic narratives. Focus group participants adopt this common view to interpret the discrepancy between bright TV reality and the harsh conditions of everyday life. A quarter of participants referred to this idea during focus group discussions. This idea often appears when the moderator asks participants about the discussions they have with friends and family.

When the moderator asked participants if they discuss news with family, the question reminded participants of their quotidian discussions, which often include

complaints about harsh living conditions. Memories of these serve as a cue that triggers these opinions. Following the question, Vladimir responds “Healthcare is getting better, education is getting better, and the roads in front of your window are being repaired” making a reference to Stalin’s famous line “Life has improved, comrades. Life has become more joyous.” This statement provoked a humorous reaction: Yekaterina asks “do you have new asphalt in front of a new window?” Vladimir replies sarcastically: “sure, how else does it happen? Sobyenin [Moscow’s mayor] installs new asphalt in front of my window every year.” Mixing Soviet clichés and everyday life problems, this dialogue points to the inadequacy of the administration in dealing with the city’s problems and mocks the difference between what participants see on TV and experiences from real life. Criticizing this discrepancy, viewers keep referring to the Soviet experience. As Galina argues, “Channel One reminds me of Soviet times – everything is so good here [...] but when you see it in life [...] it is not like this.” This positive TV image of life in Russia clashes with viewers’ experiences of economic deprivation. As Victor puts it, “they talk about unemployment. They say that we have two to three percent unemployment in Russia. What? Twenty-five, even thirty percent is more likely.” Participants believe that the government applies censorship to the news and installs “the Iron Curtain as previously [in the USSR]” (Larisa). The motive behind this censorship is an attempt to shift viewers’ attention away from domestic problems. As Victor states, “[they are] just shifting focus so as not to show the problems that exist in Russia.” The only way to decipher these unrealistic images is to use “our own heads” (Veronika) or read between the lines.

When not framed through the lens of the official narrative, participants see TV news differently. They consider the news to be an inadequate representation of the real economic situation. They hold the state responsible for distracting the population from domestic problems by shifting the focus to an international agenda. Relying on the cultural images of the Soviet Union, they refer to the common idea that Soviet citizens had a skill to “read between the lines.” However, while this cultural in-built skill is one of the explanations of the critical attitude of the post-Soviet viewer (e.g., Hutchings & Ryulova, 2009), it is not a sufficient explanation. As Mickiewicz argues, it “is of little use in looking at what conclusions viewers come to, and via what mechanism” (Mickiewicz, 2008, p. 5). My findings expand this argument. Since Reading Between the Lines is just one situational opinion among seven others, it appears to be a culturally-defined cognitive heuristic which allows TV viewers to make

sense of news rather than a skill which allows them to become critical viewers. My findings also clarify the mechanism which mobilizes this opinion. Discussions about harsh living conditions makes this opinion more accessible than other heuristics. As a result, it is used to make sense of TV news.

The Business of War

Another way to look at the Russia-Ukraine conflict among participants is to infer what causes it. Specifically, many participants hypothesized that it could be the result of the private business interests of particular elite groups. A significant group of participants used this thematic lens throughout focus group discussions. Discussing the war, viewers raise the topic of private interests very often. War as a cue triggers the experience of living under the permanent economic crisis of the 1990s.

For instance, discussing the future of Ukraine, one participant sympathizes with the Ukrainian people, both in government-controlled and rebel-controlled territories. He compares the current conditions in Eastern Ukraine with the 1990s in Russia: “We survived this once in the 1990s. However, they survived it in the 1990s, and now it is even worse. The same situation, but there is also war [on top of it].” Besides the crisis, this period is also associated with oligarchic rule. It triggers a chain of associations linking private business interests to war in which the Russian-Ukraine conflict is seen as a continuation of the intra-elite struggle of the 1990s. Ivan summarizes this approach using a Russian proverb: “For some people war is war, for others it is a dear mother” (*Komu voina, a komu mat' rodna*). He thinks that what lies behind this war is mostly property interests of particular groups: “it is just a reformatting of property. They earn money.”

In contrast to the official narrative, in which all actors held responsible for the conflict are either Western or Ukrainian, in the case of this opinion, TV viewers blame both Russian and Ukrainian elites. As Roman says, “this instability in Ukraine is beneficial for certain circles [of people]. On their side, as on our side.” War is a mess, and any traces of financial interest will be erased as a result of this mess. “War will write off everything,” continues Roman. Even humanitarian aid, which is often considered to be an important act of compassion from the official narrative perspective, is built into this hypocritical policy. As Roman says, “A little bit here, a little bit there, and then boom! We provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine. We are good [...] This instability is exploited.” At first directed toward the elite interests that lie behind

the war, this criticism extends further to the hypocritical policies of the Russian state. A nexus of vested interests is what makes the war continue. Accordingly, the end to this war will be possible only when the state will change, not only in Ukraine, but also in Russia. As Ksenia puts it, “soon it [the war] will end.” Galina adds: “And power [in Russia] will change.”

When not framed through the lens of the official narrative, participants see TV news about the Russia-Ukraine conflict differently. Reminiscing on the turbulent economic and political situation of the 1990s, they draw on this alternative layer of knowledge as a source of cues to make sense of TV news. Predictably, this layer provides them with the alternative framework of interpretation and shifts blame attribution. Instead of attributing responsibility for the war to the West and Ukraine, as the Kremlin’s official narrative does, they assign it to the Russian and Ukrainian oligarchic elite.

Obsession with Ukraine

The next set of opinions about TV news is about the saturation of information about Ukraine. While the term “obsession” sounds clinical, it is borrowed from the participants’ descriptions. They use it to emphasize the abnormal and excessive attention paid by Russian television to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. A minority of participants referred to this theme. Like emotional burnout, it is typically triggered when the moderator referred to practices of watching. When asked about practices of watching, participants are reminded about the experiential dimension of watching TV which triggers negative emotions which have been accumulated during the years of the conflict.

For instance, the moderator asks: “Did you become more interested [in politics after the beginning of the conflict]?” The experience of watching reminds participants of traumatic experiences. It triggers a particular opinion that consists of a dissatisfaction with the fact that Ukraine has dominated the Russian media for many years. As Viktor eloquently puts it, “Every day (...) [they discuss] Ukraine. (...) I feel that I do not understand where I am living in – in Russia or Ukraine.” Viewers feel that too much attention is paid to the conflict. Though Ukraine shares history with Russia, it is no longer “the Soviet Union, which was united” (Kristina). TV viewers thus feel that too much attention is paid to the conflict. As Roman puts it, “It is a completely independent state—it is their business, their problems [...] I do not care who is in

Ukraine, nor do I care who is in Mozambique.” This perceived obsession with Ukrainian politics makes viewers critical towards both Russian TV and the government. They reiterate that the Ukraine-dominated media agenda is an attempt to distract the population from domestic problems. As Galina argues, “we too have many problems [...] We need to pay attention to them.” This predominance of Ukraine-related news is considered to be a way of manipulating public opinion. As Larisa puts it, “it [TV] brainwashes us all the time [...] Ukraine, Ukraine (...), do not forget.”

Scholars argue that the repetitive and formulaic nature of contemporary journalism is one of the reasons for declining interest in matters of public concern. Due to the nature of contemporary journalism, journalists rely on simplistic categories to structure their material, such as “importance, interest, controversy, the unusual, timeliness, and proximity” (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991, p. 106). On one hand, these clichés are necessary for both producing media content fast and presenting news in a simplified way so that the audience is already familiar with basic formats and can easily comprehend it. On the other hand, these repetitive and formulaic structures lead to the indifference of the public and compassion fatigue (Moeller, 1999). Obsession with Ukraine is a specific political, rather than purely psychological, version of compassion fatigue. Encountering an enormous amount of content focusing on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, TV viewers get tired of it. However, in addition to getting tired, they also consider it as a sign of manipulation and question TV news and the government’s policies. Reflecting on the repetitive nature of TV news on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, TV viewers draw on another alternative layer of knowledge to make sense of TV news.

Concern for Others

The following opinion mainly focuses on concerns for vulnerable social groups that may be exposed to violent reporting. Several participants referred to it during the focus group interviews. Directly watching traumatic news reports featuring human suffering typically triggers this narrative. This traumatic experience serves as a cue that activates concern for the well-being of other viewers. In viewers’ opinions, contemporary Russian news coverage is too violent. As Galina puts it, “they broadcast killings live.” They are especially concerned that children and youth are exposed to traumatic images. As Fedor argues, “we cannot show such things to children.” This coverage, viewers suggest, undermines citizens’ psychological well-being and can provoke dangerous consequences. As Fedor continues, “people are [...] in prostration,

get nervous and jump out of balconies.” This concern is also based on references to the Soviet experience. As Sofia puts it, “Russia can be united, [just as] in the Soviet Union, through showing more peaceful things. Let’s show movies like before—how people visit each other [...] Violence does not unite. It creates fear.”

Like the previous reactions, Concern for Others stands out as a critical narrative which does not match the Kremlin’s Official Narrative. While watching TV news about the conflict, participants tend to react emotionally and criticize TV news for the excessive use of graphical images of violence and human suffering. Apparently, yet one more domain-specific layer of knowledge is activated during the watching process. With another cue comes a new alternative framework for the critical evaluation of TV news. However, Concern for Others might be underlined by a deeper psychological process. While thinking about the influence of the media, people are prone to the third person effect. They tend to underestimate the effects of media on themselves and overestimate the effect of media on other people. This effect is well-documented in the literature and seems to be grounded in self-esteem. In short, “people reinforce their self-esteem by estimating themselves to be smart enough to disbelieve media messages whereas others believe the messages” (Paul et al., 2007, p. 61). This effect seems to be especially pronounced in the context of exposure to sensitive content, such as sex and violence. For instance, Gunther and Hwa find that people are more likely to support governmental censorship of media content partly because they think that sensitive content will negatively influence others (Gunther & Hwa, 1996). While people think that media affect others to a greater degree than themselves, violent content could intensify this tendency even more by adding additional emotional intensity to the Concern for Others opinion.

Lies & the Law

Finally, some viewers approached TV news through the framework of legality. Only seven participants expressed this opinion in one or another fashion. There was a moment in the video about military conflict in which the journalist referred to two controversial pieces of information. One was the correspondence between the head of the Ukrainian Ministry of Interior, Arsen Avakov, and the head of a Ukrainian voluntary regiment, Semen Semenchnko, allegedly retrieved from a hacked Facebook account. Another was an allegedly intercepted communication between two Ukrainian

pilots during the attack in Donetsk. No proof is provided that the information is real and its leakage is unlikely.

In the case of this opinion, the moderator typically asked whether the evidence seems reliable or it does not. For instance, in one focus group, the moderator asked: “does it seem credible?” The participants immediately used the cue. For instance, Svetlana asks: “Do they really communicate on Facebook? [...] I just think that they are military people. They will not communicate there [via the platform].” Pilots’ communication also seems doubtful; as Maria says: “Can they really put the flight recorder’s recording in the news? This is bullshit.” Viewers frame these anomalous elements of a news report using a legal framework. According to Alexander, “If they show it, they show a hacked account. [...] This is a fraudulent, criminal action.” In other words, viewers classified the information shown in the news report as a crime. Activating another layer of knowledge and using legality as the cues, the participants challenge the official narrative yet again.

The findings show that viewers form diverse opinions about what they see in the news. When provided with cues embedded in the official narrative, they essentially reproduce the Kremlin’s official position. However, when the discussion is framed through their personal experience, they bring up six diverse sets of opinions. Surprisingly, even a single participant can hold contradictory ideas in his or her memory which are situationally activated depending on the particular layers of memory at work. The most striking examples are Fedor and Mikhail. When the discussion is framed in terms of the Official Narrative, Fedor thinks that violent reports are used to elicit “a rejection [of the Ukrainian regime] [...] We are right; they are villains.” Such news reports are appropriate because they unite people in order to defend the country in the face of an external threat. However, when TV is discussed in terms of his personal experience, Fedor quickly turns to another set of opinions: Concern for Others. Relying on another layer of knowledge, he expresses an opposite opinion: “People [...] get nervous and jump off balconies.” This response is based on another cue: his experience of living in the Soviet Union. Drawing on this experience Fedor says, “there was less of such dreadful news [in the USSR...] People were calm.” In the context of his Soviet-era memories, violent reporting is seen as dangerous. Mikhail’s response is also illustrative here. When the discussion is framed through the Official Narrative, he is convinced that Russian TV news about Ukraine is objective and impartial. As he says, “we do not need to falsify information about what is going

on abroad.” However, when discussing a particular news report about events in Ukraine, he says that there are falsifications in the reporting and uses legal language to classify them as a crime. He says that “this is just unethical,” “it is a crime,” and even refers to a specific article of the law pertaining to crimes of “slander and falsehood” (Mikhail). Apparently activating another layer of knowledge, he relies on another lens which leads to the opposite and critical interpretation. All the opinions and triggering cues are summarized in the table below.

Opinion	Cues
Official Narrative	News episodes themselves, or media discourse in general
Emotional Burnout	The experience of watching traumatic news episodes in everyday life
Reading Between the Lines	TV viewers’ discussions about politics with friends and family
The Business of War	Memories of the 1990s
Obsession with Ukraine	The experience of watching traumatic news episodes in everyday life
Concern for Others	Direct watching of traumatic news coverage featuring the war during focus groups
Lies & the Law	The moderator bringing up the topic of credibility in specific news episodes

Table 5. TV Viewers’ Opinions

4.2.2. Politically Engaged: Applicability Effects

A few focus group participants had a better understanding of politics as well as expressing more interest in politics. These participants were eager to actively seek information. Unlike the previous group, they recall particular news media: independent sources such as *Meduza*, *RBK*, *Vedomosti*, and *Echo of Moscow* as well as directly or indirectly state controlled sources like *LifeNews*, *RIA Novosti*, *Lenta.ru*. In addition, they scored better on the political knowledge test. Unlike the previous groups who relied on accessibility as a mechanism, they used the most accessible ideas to make sense of news, and expressed different opinions when new cues are introduced, the participants in this group had consistent political views. As described in the theoretical chapter of the dissertation, they relied on applicability as a mechanism and deployed their political schemas to process TV news in consistent manner, and their opinion did not fluctuate from context to context. They also see connections between different ideas and maintain a consistent opinion in different contexts regardless of cues introduced by the moderator. A few of the participants held consistent political views. Anton and Alexander are illustrative examples, representing pro-government and anti-government views respectively.

TV viewers with stable and consistent political views do not change their opinions from context to context. They see connections between different ideas, and their opinion is the same in different contexts, regardless of the new cues. As mentioned, Anton is supportive of the Russian government. His central ideas resemble the official narrative. He blames the Ukrainian government for the war in Eastern Ukraine and supports the annexation of Crimea. Anton thinks that Russia deserves better treatment from the West and that Western actions toward Russia are hypocritical. During the focus group, he tried to interpret any questions and statements through this lens. For instance, Irina questioned the credibility of a TV report during the focus group. Anton responds: “[Russian news] is more credible than the news in Ukraine and the United States.” When Irina criticized Russian TV’s coverage of the Ukrainian Church for calling it “schismatic,” Anton defended this label: “It is really a schismatic church, it goes against the grain of our opinion, the government’s opinion.” When Nina discusses Russia’s problems and says that “our state is a corrupt thing,” Anton responds consistently: “Bribes are everywhere [...] the United States, any other branded companies, they all take bribes, they all promote their interests.” Anton tries to reinterpret what Nina has said and builds it into his geopolitical schema.

Alexander has different views. Unlike Anton, he is very skeptical of the Russian and Ukrainian governments alike. Alexander thinks that politics is about getting money. Media sources, according to Alexander, express the private interests of their owners and cannot be trusted. The only way to get credible information is to ask personal acquaintances who have witnessed the events themselves. When Larisa says that Russian camera operators have “incredible professionalism,” Alexander responds that they “they do not lie less [because of their professionalism].” When Sonia expresses sympathies toward the Russian oppositional radio station *Echo of Moscow*, Alexander objects: “It is owned by Gazprom-media, in-cre-di-ble!” Even the oppositional *Echo of Moscow* cannot be trusted, since a government-affiliated business owns it. Unlike the majority of participants, Anton and Alexander have consistent frameworks for their interpretations. When they face opposing views, they try to interpret them through a preexisting political lens. While most of the respondents shift their opinions depending on the new cues and accessible ideas which may have in mind at a given moment, the minority have more consistent political worldviews, apply them to TV news, and do not shift opinions so fast.

4.3. Conclusion

In what follows, I briefly summarize the findings of this chapter and reflect on their implications. While these implications can only be formulated as provisional suggestions due to methodological limitations, these findings still generate some interesting insights into the principles of news reception under an electoral authoritarian regime.

Most of the focus group participants were politically disengaged. They scored poorly on the political knowledge test and had a quite superficial understanding of politics as well little political interest. As a result, they did not have consistent opinions and fluctuated between partially contradicting considerations which contained both criticism and approval of the Russian government and media. When being asked general questions about President Putin, the Russian/Ukrainian governments, the actions of the West, they tended to repeat the Kremlin's official narrative. When being asked particular questions about the daily practices of watching TV news, conversations with friends and relatives while watching TV news, and reactions to particular broadcasts watched during focus group discussions, participants expressed six critical opinions. These reactions were critical opinions accusing the government of manipulating the media, using aggressive emotional persuasive techniques, and other forms of malpractice. In extreme cases, some participants could shift between contradictory considerations without noticing incoherence. These findings are in line with research in cognitive psychology and political science. Memory is domain specific: "knowledge in one domain may be organized according to principles different from knowledge in another" (Schank & Abelson, 1977, p. 3). In the case of people who are not engaged in politics, the domain-specific nature of political reasoning and incoherence is a norm rather than an exception (Zaller, 1992). In other words, the incoherence in TV viewers' opinions can be interpreted because of their political disengagement. To minimize the efforts needed for the analysis of news and political information, they rely on the most *accessible* ideas in memory to makes sense of the news. Since these ideas are located in various disconnected layers of memory, these individuals come up with different, partly incoherent, and contradictory opinions.

The minority of focus group participants scored better on political knowledge test and judging by focus group discussions, had a better understanding of politics as well as more political interest. As a result, they did not shift their opinions. Rather, they

had more coherent political schemas which were applied to process political information in a uniformed way across different contexts. Predictably, they also tended to reject or reinterpret information to fit these schemas. This process is likely to result from reliance on *applicability* as a mechanism. Unlike most participants, these politically engaged participants had more consistent political schemas which they then apply to process the news (e.g., Fiske et al., 1990). As a result, incoherencies in their judgments were significantly reduced. However, applicability-based schematic processing is typically characterized by consistency bias. Subjects tried to interpret all information in a uniform manner in order to make it fit their schemas. Information inconsistent with their schemas, including the opinions of others and information from the news they do not agree with, was reinterpreted or rejected.

These mechanisms as such are not specific for Russia or electoral authoritarianism. The difference between mobilizing the most accessible considerations and applying coherent schemas is influenced by political interest and sophistication which vary across the population in every society. However, while there are always those who have little interest in politics and those who are interested in politics, there is also always a larger middle group which traditionally constitutes the main object of analysis of political psychology (Converse, 1964; Zaller, 1992). This group is especially dependent on the political environment in dealing with news and politics, and that is where the influence of authoritarian institutional design comes in. These citizens are interested in politics, but this interest is not enough to make them active information seekers. For them to be interested in learning political information, there should be proper *incentives* or the perception that their involvement in politics can have tangible effects (Downs, 1957). As is clear from the data, they do not consider learning political information worth investing effort. Most participants in my research are politically apathetic. They do not feel that acquiring political knowledge can have tangible effects. Left without the incentives to learn about politics, they deal with political information the best they can: by retrieving the most accessible ideas and using them for interpretation. These findings allow one to better understand media, politics, and authoritarian survival in Russia and emphasize the role of political engagement in news processing which can be relevant for other similar electoral authoritarian regimes with some reservations.

My findings show that Russian television definitely affects TV viewers' opinions about politics. By borrowing the most accessible ideas to form opinions about politics,

they rely on interpretations of events provided by TV news. However, this effect is short-lived. As they are not engaged in public affairs on a routine basis, they do not have enough cognitive resources to fully assimilate ideas provided by state-owned TV. If this model applies equally to other Russian TV viewers, the power of television, which is considered to be an important pillar of Putin's regime, is not as formidable as it seems. Most probably, the enormously high ratings of presidential approval in Russia may also partly result from accessibility effects. Russian mass surveys consistently report high popular approval of Putin's policies. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Putin's popularity has been consistently between 70% and 85% (Levada Center, 2019a). However, pollsters often ask general political questions—such as questions about the country's leaders and international politics—which my research suggests are likely to trigger accessibility effects. Russian media have been paying disproportionate attention to international politics for years. As a result, questions about Putin or Crimea asked by pollsters can make participants reproduce the content of the recent news made rather than express their opinions.

These findings can also be corroborated by more robust survey- and experiment-based research. Scholars find that priming significantly affects Russian's evaluations of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. For instance, Stoycheff and Nisbet (2017) found that priming hawkish constructs in memory increases support for the militarized conflict, while priming economic, military, and diplomatic costs of the conflict decreases support for the militarized conflict. Similarly, Sirotkina and Zavadskaya (2020) find that priming constructs related to the annexation of Crimea increases support for political leadership, while priming constructs related to economic crisis decreases support for political leadership. As demonstrated in the theoretical chapter, priming is an effect resulting from short and unstable accessibility mechanism rather than deeply held convictions and is thus similar to the incoherence experienced by the politically disengaged focus group participants explored in this chapter. The instability of views regarding abstract political agenda and the primacy of personal experience in news processing demonstrated in this chapter are also consistent with the findings of Savin et al. (2018) who found that Russian TV viewers are susceptible to counterframing and change their views of the Russian-American relations depending on the framing. Just as in the case of my focus group participants, this change results from the absence of interest in politics. Unlike distant Russian-American relations, issues such as poor economic performance are highly personally relevant for Russian citizens and

are accessible via personal experience rather than media. For instance, Rosenfeld (2018) found that changes in regional economy affect citizens' evaluations of performance of regional authorities regardless of media coverage because citizens extract economic information from their experience and local conditions rather than media. These findings are consistent with my findings: focus group participants forcibly challenge the official narrative of the regime when the discussion touches upon the issues which are relevant and familiar from personal experience, such as economy or emotional well-being.

In addition, these findings allow me to emphasize the connection between political engagement, news processing, and authoritarian survival under an electoral authoritarian regime. As noted above, the research on news processing under electoral authoritarian regimes has been focusing on how, why, and under what conditions citizens trust or distrust news (e.g., Mickiewicz, 2008; Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). However, the influence of political engagement on news processing has largely been outside the scope of analysis. This is a factor which crucially determines how citizens make sense of news (Lodge & Hamil, 1986; Zaller, 1992). My findings show that political engagement crucially predetermines the way citizens process the news. As politically disengaged citizens, most focus group participants had no coherent political schemas and consequently processed political information by building bridges between news and whatever knowledge they had at hand. Without being able to articulate coherent opinions, they did not challenge, rather than support, the authoritarian equilibrium. This is in line with scholars who argue that unlike totalitarian regimes, authoritarian regimes are structurally inclined to rely on the demobilization of citizens (Linz, 2000). While political science provides well-grounded analysis of this strategy at the level of political actors, it is not yet clear enough how it affects news processing and the individual psychology of citizens. This study allows me to clarify some of the psychological correlates of this situation. The findings demonstrate that this demobilization may work by preventing citizens from articulating consistent opinions which are necessary to challenge (or support) this fragile equilibrium.

These findings may be relevant for other electoral authoritarian regimes, but with some reservations. Since low political engagement is a crucial factor which determines how citizens process political information, these findings are mostly relevant for the regimes characterized by low political engagement. Not all electoral

authoritarian regimes are born alike: the level of mobilization in electoral authoritarianisms can vary between regimes and within regimes. Authoritarian regimes in Ukraine or Georgia are much more competitive than the authoritarian regime in Russia, and Putin's regime itself had a period of demobilization (2000s) and a mobilizational period (2010s). However, on average electoral authoritarian regimes are characterized by lower voter turnout (Reuter, 2020) than democracies. Scholars have shown that electoral corruption (Kostadionva, 2009; Martinez i Coma & Trinh, 2016; Simpser, 2012; Stockemer et al., 2012) and absence of competitiveness in elections (Croke et al., 2015; Frantz, 2018; McAllister & White, 2008; Turovsky & Korneeva, 2018) can negatively affect political engagement. In addition, more constrained media environments decrease political knowledge and engagement (Leeson, 2008). Finally, many electoral authoritarian regimes deliberately pursue demobilization of voters (Linz 2000; McAllister & White, 2017; Robertson, 2011). Hence, these findings should be more applicable to electoral authoritarian regimes which are characterized by one or several of the following conditions: less competitive nature, higher level of electoral corruption, and other factors making political engagement seem as a less meaningful activity which cannot change the conduct of politics; restricted media freedom which presents learning political information in an easy and accessible way; the deliberate reliance on demobilization as a strategy.

CHAPTER V. TELEVISION, HEURISTICS, AND MEDIA CREDIBILITY UNDER AN ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

5.1. Introduction

While the previous chapter explored how political engagement can affect news processing, this chapter focuses on the second aspect of this process – the heuristics used to navigate political information. It seeks to address the second sub-question of this dissertation: How do citizens evaluate the credibility of TV news under an electoral authoritarian regime? The chapter analyses the heuristics used by Russian TV viewers to evaluate the credibility of TV news and places them within the context of the debates on low-information rationality. It investigates the role of political and media institutions in supplying TV viewers with heuristics used to process political information to provide a better understanding of news processing in Russia and some insight into the nature of news processing which is relevant for other electoral authoritarian regimes.

Just like motivation to acquire political information and engage with politics, heuristics to deal with political information are essential for news processing. Individuals rely on a variety of cues to make sense of political information, such as reputation (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), character traits (Berlo et al., 1969), gender and age (Armstrong & McAdams, 2009; Wood, 1979;), ideological, political, and party cues (Baum & Gussin, 2008; Dalton et al., 1998; Nelson & Garst, 2005; Popkin, 1994; Rahn, 1993; Vallone et al., 1985;), social cues (Axsom et al., 1987), visual cues (Fogg et al., 2002), and endorsements and opinions on social media (Messing & Westwood, 2014; Metzger et al., 2010). These cues trigger heuristics – simple logical rules of thumb – which are used to evaluate news media messages. The complicated machinery of heuristics, cues, and institutions constitutes low-information rationality or “a method of combining, in an economical way, learning and information from past experiences, daily life, the media, and political campaigns” (Popkin, 1994, p. 7). Being incapable of nuanced and detailed analysis of information in both political (Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1997) and social spheres (e.g., Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), *en masse* citizens can still cast ballots intelligently and identify unreliable news by relying on the heuristics based on the political environment.

Media systems can vary giving citizens more or less useful instruments to use

as heuristics. While media in democracies are exposed to a variety of political and economic pressures, these pressures affect journalists through *indirect* mechanisms, such as reliance on official sources as the easiest way to acquire pertinent information (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). In electoral authoritarian regimes, the *direct* control of the government over media (Egorov et al., 2009; Gelbach, 2010; Gelbach & Sonin, 2004) and intricately persuasion strategies to manipulate public opinion (King et al., 2013; Sanovich et al., 2018; Yablokov, 2015) are much more common. Since citizens can often identify political bias in media, persuasive skepticism about news is present in many both more and less competitive authoritarian regimes, such as China (Huang, 2018; Truex, 2016), Russia (Mickiewicz, 2005; 2008) or Ukraine (Szostek, 2018). Since reputation and other cognitive heuristics which are used to evaluate political information require some level of trust in media organizations, this profound distrust makes their usage less likely in authoritarian contexts. Similarly, political systems can vary by giving citizens more or less useful instruments to use as heuristics, such as party cues in competitive party systems (Popkin, 1994). In electoral authoritarian regimes, party systems are much more constrained, accompanied by a high degree of political corruption, and often reduced to a mere façade. Both low competitiveness (Croke et al., 2015; Frantz, 2018; Turovsky & Korneeva, 2018) and electoral fairness (Kostadionva, 2009; Martinez i Coma & Trinh, 2016; Simpser, 2012; Stockemer et al., 2012) reduce political engagement and make parties seem untrustworthy so that citizens are less likely to consider them as institutional vehicles representing their interests or views. As a result, ideological and party identifications rarely work as meaningful heuristics for citizens in electoral authoritarian regimes (Frye, 2019; Sirotkina & Zavadskaya, 2020; Wojcieszak et al., 2019).

These patterns are reflected in how citizens make use of heuristics for dealing with news and political information. A number of studies indirectly suggest that rather than heuristics drawn from political environment, such as opinions of parties and politicians or reputation of media sources, citizens under authoritarian regimes are more prone to rely on alternative non-political sources of heuristics, such as personal experience (Mickiewicz, 2005; Pjesivac et al., 2016), abstract reasoning (Mickiewicz, 2005; Toepfl, 2013), and communication with other people (Kobayashi, 2016; Smyth & Oates, 2015). As the functioning of low-information rationality under electoral authoritarian regimes is a largely unaddressed issue in the scholarly debate, this chapter investigates the heuristics Russian TV viewers use to make sense of TV

news. I argue that an electoral authoritarian regime makes it more difficult to entrust media and political institutions with the job of interpreting public affairs because they are not considered to be independent and authoritative. Citizens always rely on a mix of heuristics which originate from both daily life and the political environment. In an authoritarian context, the balance of this mix is shifted towards non-political heuristics which are borrowed from daily life and do not depend on the political environment. Adapting to an authoritarian environment in which political and media institutions enjoy little trust, TV viewers prefer to rely more on other tools, such as common-sense cultural stereotypes, which seem more reliable in the context of partly compromised institutions.

The chapter is structured as follows. I first discuss TV viewers' conceptualization of credibility. The discussion of their concept of credibility is followed by an analysis of the heuristics used by TV viewers to evaluate the credibility of news during the focus group discussions. I identify credibility heuristics, the sources of these heuristics, and triggering cues. The analysis of credibility heuristics is followed by the analysis of how political engagements changes credibility assessment for more politically engaged participants. I conclude with the discussion reflecting on low-information rationality in Russian and authoritarian contexts.

5.5. Data from Focus Group Participants

5.5.1. Credibility Heuristics

In what follows, I analyze Russian TV viewers' response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict coverage from the information processing perspective. Specifically, I focus on TV viewers' assessment of the credibility of TV messages. Following Hilligoss and Reich's suggestion, I distinguish between participants' conceptualizations of credibility and actual strategies of credibility assessment (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008). This distinction is crucial because one's conceptualization of credibility does not coincide with the actual strategies of inferring credibility. One may apply no verification strategies but report verifying information because of social desirability (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007). This discrepancy is even more crucial for Russia. All three major political epochs in Russia have been characterized by the excessive manipulation over media with different tools: manipulation through direct governmental control in the Soviet era, oligarchs' manipulation of the media through the mix of ownership and direct political

control in the chaotic 1990s, and manipulation over media by the newly consolidated authoritarian regime through the mix of ownership and direct political control in the 2000-2010s. As a result, the fact that media are being manipulated has become a part of the folk wisdom. If one is asked whether news can be trusted, the direct questions are likely to trigger this folk wisdom leading to a socially-desirable negative answer. Answering otherwise would be equal to acknowledging intellectual incompetence.

To avoid confusing what people say they do and what they actually do, I employed two types of questions. First, I asked more general questions focused on how they define credibility and whether they pay attention to it. Second, I asked more specific questions about the credibility of particular elements of the news screened during focus groups. When focus group participants identified a specific element of a news message as credible or not credible, I asked them to explain the logical chains – or heuristics – which led them to their conclusions. I documented these levels separately. After making sure that the conceptualizations were separated from the actual strategies, I categorized credibility assessment strategies.

Divide by Two: Conceptualizations of Credibility

As expected, Russian TV viewers are skeptical about credibility of the news in the post-Soviet context. All three major political formations in Russia – the communist regime, unstable democracy with intensive intra-elite struggle in the 1990s, and authoritarian regime of the 2000s – 2010s – had a partly compromised media system, in which the values of objectivity and impartiality were put into question by political manipulation over media by elites. The experience of facing biased media coverage time and again became a part of persuasive common sense which questions the very possibility of existence of news which reflect objective picture of public affairs. Although independent media and political institutions can hardly be fully independent from economic and political pressures in any country, in authoritarian contexts they are perceived as even less independent. As a result, citizens in authoritarian contexts find that the likelihood of trustworthy news is questionable (e.g., Mickiewicz, 2005; Szostek, 2018).

There are two forms of explicit conceptualization of credibility among TV viewers. One is the old adage “who pays the piper calls the tune.” In short, it dictates that news cannot be trusted because the owners, groups of interests, or politicians always transmit information which is beneficial to their own interests. As Anton puts it,

“Definitely, I do not trust news completely, it is even stupid [...] if [the situation happens] in Ukraine, it is logical that Ukraine defends its people, Russia [defends] its people.” Alina essentially repeats the same idea: “You understand that television will never say the truth. Everything will be covered as they need it.” TV viewers see *any* news as “the propaganda of desired information to the people in order to make think in particular way” (Nina). Those who transmit this information are typically understood as any powerful elites, such as oligarchs, politicians, and the government. Another one is the doubt in a person being able to figure out the murky and shady arrangements of post-Soviet politics. Post-Soviet politics is structured around informal networks which prevent transparency. Therefore, even if one assumes that post-Soviet media can be trustworthy, a lay person will not be able to makes sense of the complicated political system anyway. As Irina puts it,

I think it does not make sense to try to figure out [the details of Russia-Ukraine conflict] [...] what we see is the tip of the iceberg. Why, how, what happens, relationships between politicians, countries, and so on – it is a different level altogether. Speaking seriously, to talk about it is to waste time.

A similar form of perceived powerlessness has been identified by Suslov in his analysis of the Russian blogosphere in the context of the annexation of Crimea. He finds that geopolitical narrative is one of the common rhetorical devices “in which people profess the impossibility of fully comprehending the complexity of forces acting on the international arena and, instead, delegate this knowledge to their political leaders” (Suslov, 2014, p. 598).

The inevitable bias which is seen as an inseparable part of any news seems to produce double normative pressure which makes skepticism a desirable trait inseparable from intelligence. The intelligent people do not trust the news. Conversely, acknowledging trust in the news becomes a synonym for foolishness. Therefore, when being asked direct questions about trust and verification of information, TV viewers perceive them as a challenge to their personal integrity. Under this normative pressure, TV viewers overwhelmingly report that they use complex verification strategies. There are several elements of the reported verification. The first one is comparison. Logic dictates that if one source of information is biased, the best way to approximate the truth is to compare it with other sources of information. As Yegor argues,

You watch some news broadcast on TV. Then you see the same news on the

Internet, but it is framed from different perspective. You read and compare – how it was covered there [on TV], how it is covered here [on the Internet].

Another one is the Divide By Two (del'it' popolam) rule. Participants refer to a simple mathematical operation of division and apply it metaphorically to news coverage. This simple rule dictates that if two sources report different versions of reality, the truth will be somewhere in between. As Oleg argues, "I am inclined to believe something in the middle. I cannot trust TV channels completely." As Larisa puts it, "Typically, the truth is somewhere in between." TV viewers see this idea of truth-in-the-middle as an ultimate logical rule which should be applied to any news rigorously and has no room for exceptions. As Ivan argues, "You see, it is not possible to say for sure what is credible there [in the news]. I approach all information skeptically. [I] divide [information] by two." Finally, the last element of the reported verification is applying one's own opinion. The idea that news should be subject to one's independent analysis rather than consumed mindlessly is the motto dominating discussions on trust and credibility in the focus group discussions. As Yekaterina puts it,

When you compare different opinions, you do not come unprepared. You also have an opinion [...] [Based on the comparison and individual opinion] you build some picture – what is true, what is not true, and where it [Russia-Ukraine conflict] is going.

In essence, the common formula of credibility assessment described by TV viewers can be divided into three stages. To see the difference, sources with a different bias have to be compared. To approximate the truth, one has to infer the objective picture by finding the middle ground between two different interpretations with different biases. The result has to be compared with individual opinions. The concept of objectivity depicted by TV viewers is well summarized by Mickiewicz as "commissioned objectivity." Instead of defining objectivity as impartial reporting, Russian TV viewers define "objectivity as the presence of opposing views even if those views represent the clash of special interests" (Mickiewicz, 2005, p. 373). However, there are several conspicuous features characterizing this process. First, it is highly unlikely that TV viewers actually practice this complex procedure of verification. Given quite scant attention to public affairs of many participants and the resources such a laborious formula would require, it is reasonable to assume that these narratives are triggered by social norms which result from the specific post-Soviet ethos of distrust of the media. Second, although TV viewers present their understanding of objectivity

as resulting from experience and knowledge of public affairs, the mental rule they describe originates in daily life rather than political experience. This rule dictates that if interpretations of two media sources do not match, they are biased; those elements of information which match can be trusted; those elements of information which do not match require deduction; based on the mismatch, one can hypothesize how biases distorted information and deduce the objective information. This set of simplistic logical operations is likely to be acquired in the course of their socialization and daily life rather than knowledge of the media, politics, and the government. Understanding of the media and politics implies that the distance between covered event and TV coverage can vary widely - from few omitted details to the outright lie. However, TV viewers disregard the complexity of public affairs by reducing objectivity to the folk wisdom which dictates that truth can be approximated by simply finding common denominator between two accounts of events.

Violence Does Not Lie: Violence and Fear as Heuristic Cues

As compared to the conceptualizations of objectivity, more domain-specific questions about particular episodes and their credibility produce drastically different results. When asked to evaluate particular elements of news broadcasts, assess their credibility, and explain the logic behind their judgments, participants talk about a variety of heuristic strategies which were hidden by socially desirable normative conceptualizations of objectivity. One of the cues which triggers the credibility heuristic is the presence of graphic representation of violence, such as images of wounded bodies, suffering people, and damaged infrastructure. Images of violence perform three perceptive functions. First, they attract and focus attention. Responding to the question about attention, Yulia argues: "I did not have emotional stress but...scenes of clashes [attract attention]." TV viewers report that their attention is captured by "dead bodies" (Sergei), "wounded man" (Alexandra), "how a person was shot" (Andrei), "crying children and crying pensioners" (Nikolai), et cetera. Second, graphic images of violence and suffering have a disproportionately large effect on memory. They are memorized better and overshadow other elements of news reports. When asked about particular episodes in a 15-minutes broadcast on the military confrontation in Donbass, Kirill acknowledges that he has only scant memory of them because his attention was focused on the introductory scene featuring violence: "I did not even pay substantial attention [to these episodes]. I just read them and forgot

them.” Graphic images of violence and suffering are memorized immediately and remain in memory. As Alexey puts it, “it [images of violence] is recorded in your head whether or not you want it.” Finally, graphic images of violence and suffering build a connection between what is seen and TV viewers’ own emotional state. In essence, they make TV viewers imagine that they are in the shoes of the people covered in the news. Describing his reaction to the broadcast about the war, Andrey says: “I am scared of finding myself there [in Donbass].” Similarly, Anna refers to her own fears: “I am the mother of two. Therefore, it provokes intense emotions in me [...] How can I let my children go anywhere [after this]?” Similarly, Elena builds the connection between her own situations and the war: “It [the war] will start here [in Russia], it will spread here if not suppressed.” In psychology, the images of violence are known for focusing attention, memorization, and appeal to personal experience. This specificity is explained by psychological mechanisms. Unlike emotionally neutral messages, fear-arousing messages are more likely to trigger peripheral route of processing which works fast, automatically, and uses the first and most salient cues for processing information (Hale & Mongeau, 1995; Nabi, 2002).

However, emotional nature of images of violence does not fully explain why participants see graphic images of violence and suffering as credible. Images of violence also trigger a heuristic which is used to evaluate credibility. While asked about credibility of images of violence, Maria responds: “Yes, of course, it [violence] does [indicate credibility].” As Yekaterina explains, “In my opinion, it looked very credible when they were beating each other.” The deeper logic of this type of judgment is explained well by Irina. She argues that:

This video confirms that there is a war [in Donbass]. There are victims. There are shots fired. There are people. It cannot be put into question [...] these are facts [...] terrible pictures of war [...] cannot be put into question.

The images of war are credible factual statements which are understood in opposition to fake information and manipulation. The images of war are credible because it is difficult to manipulate and fake these images. As Nadezhda puts it, “These scenes provoke negative [reaction] because you see that it happens in reality, it is not fabricated.” The heuristic at work here dictates that news can be fabricated; however, it is difficult to fabricate real violence and suffering; therefore, the images of violence and suffering are true. This heuristic seems to be based on the binary opposition between fabrication and truth and the set of logical premises and operations

originating in daily life rather than specific political and institutional context of Russia.

Professionalism in Appearance

The behavior and appearance of journalists appears to be an important cue for Russian TV viewers. They pay attention to how journalists look, talk, and behave to infer credibility of the messages they transmit. There is a variety of visual cues TV viewers react to. For Maria, “tidiness” and “handsome[ness]” are important visual cues. For Ilya, it is a “good haircut.” Public speaking skills is an especially important cue: Maria mentions “correct speech” as an important cue. For Tatiana, “diction” is specifically important. For Svetlana, “the way they speak” provokes trust. She opposes journalists “whose speech is correctly structured” to people whose speech contains junk words, such as “a, well, like.” For Mikhail, it is “intonations,” “expression,” “argumentation,” and “subtleness of explanation.”

In essence, all these external visual and linguistic cues indicate that journalists are “masters of their professions” and “emit professionalism” (Svetlana). These external cues seem to have no relation to credibility of the news and yet they are used as cues to infer credibility. The rule underlying this logic resembles the logic underlining credibility assessment of websites based on the design. As Fogg et al. argue, the reason behind the connection between inferred credibility and website design is that “A Web design team demonstrates expertise to the users. Users may then assume this expertise extends to the quality of information on the site” (Fogg et al., 2002, p. 27). Similarly, by looking at visual and linguistic cues, TV viewers conclude that journalists are “professionals in what they are doing” (Svetlana). In turn, this professionalism extends to the information they convey and signal credibility. As in case of Violence Does Not Lie heuristic, this heuristic originates in daily life rather than specific political and institutional context of Russia. It is logical to assume that the skill in providing credible information results from professional training. With professional training journalists also acquire specific traits. Therefore, people with such traits are more likely to provide credible information.

Two Heads Are Better Than One

Social cues, such as opinions of friends or other people, can be an important factor in perceiving credibility. People rely on others to form opinions about politics (Katz et al., 2005; Lazarsfeld, 1944), decide whether they need to engage in deep

analysis of information or can rely on “hints” given by others which can allow for superficial processing without investing much effort (Axsom et al., 1987; Metzger et al., 2010). Social cues are important for Russian TV viewers as well. They rely on others, both trusted others and opinions of people found on the Internet, to infer credibility of the news about Russia-Ukraine conflict. There are two main categories of people who are identified as those who can influence their opinions.

First, it is trusted others. As Galina explains, “I am typically too lazy [to analyze information]. My husband watches news and RBK [independent business online channel]. He analyzes this information and shares it with me.” Similarly, Yekaterina argues that she talks to friends who are more politically knowledgeable than her friends: “I communicate with people who know more than me. Then I am building my understanding – what is true there, what is false, and where it is going [in Donbass].” Maria argues that she relies on the opinion of her father-in-law because

he is older and was born in Ukraine [...] I trust him because he is a man of many talents [...] he has good education, he worked abroad, he understands the old and the new, he can compare [the events with his diverse experience].

Another one is particular journalists who are perceived as being authoritative and knowledgeable. For instance, complaining about the absence of credibility and general confusion related to the Donbass war, Veronika says that it is not clear “who started war there [in Donbass].” Responding to Veronica, Galina suggests watching films of a journalist who can provide explanations: “There is a journalist, Vera Kuzmina, [she can answer the question] why and who started it [the war]. She has films, she even was my favorite journalist at certain point, watch her films and broadcasts.” Finally, TV viewers rely on accounts of those who they perceive as witnesses of events. For instance, Kirill explains that if he gets interested in a certain event, he can look for information from the witnesses of this event found online: “If there was some event, you can visit Ukrainian forums and see what people write about it, talk to people [and ask] – ‘did it really happen’? He [online forum participant] will say: ‘yes, it happened.’” In this case, others are perceived as credible sources of information because of privileged access to events rather than superior knowledge.

As in the case of the previous rules, this heuristic originates from common-sense rather than specific political and institutional context of Russia. Trusted others are perceived as being experts because of their seemingly superior knowledge.

Witnesses' accounts are perceived as credible because of witnesses' privileged access to events. It is logical to assume that they have better understanding of the events and, therefore, can be relied on to infer credibility.

Persuasive Intent

While assessing credibility of the news about the Russia-Ukraine conflict, TV viewers often feel that media attempt to manipulate them. If particular features of coverage are recognized as persuasion techniques, the credibility of a broadcast becomes discredited in the eyes of TV viewers. There are three features of media coverage which demonstrate the persuasive nature of news to TV viewers: clichés, absence of alternative views, and excessive reliance on emotions.

While material presented in the news about Ukraine can vary, the broadcasts themselves are often identical. As a result, TV viewers not only recognize their identical nature. They can even predict the structure of future news broadcast. As Irina argues, she was struck by the identical nature of all news reports on the Russia-Ukraine conflict:

The news about Ukraine is all like that. It is like I watched it ten times. What I watch on TV typically consist of several parts: it is a violent clash, then a reaction of some freaks from the government or from somewhere else. Then, some statements on Facebook or something else. And then further developments from the author of a broadcast. It is all the same all the time.

The repetition of identical plots makes TV viewers suspect that someone is attempting to persuade them, leading to defensive reactions and mistrust. The absence of alternative views is another cue which points at the unreliable nature of particular news broadcasts. The presence of only one interpretation of events and narrow political views make TV viewers skeptical about the credibility of news. As Leonid argues, "there is no two-side analysis" in the news broadcast about war in Donbass. Alexey complains that this broadcast highlights negative aspects of life in Ukraine with "no light notes." As Boris puts it, "the coverage is framed in a certain way... [it is] a black-and-white representation of the situation [in Donbass]." This focus on negative aspects ignoring positive aspects and absence of alternative views are immediately read as an attempt to persuade and indoctrinate. Leonid recognizes the absence of alternative views as a strategic move: media attempt to "depress viewers." The absence of

alternative viewers is used as a cue to infer forged and manufactured nature of the news. As Yegor explains,

You trust it [one-sided coverage] less because you do not want to brainwash yourself [...] Channel One [journalists] like to criticize one side and praise another one. That is, we are saints, they are...[not] [...] It is strange. It is not like this in reality; therefore, you start to think that something is wrong here.

Finally, the excessive reliance on emotions is also read as persuasive technique. Alexey points out that emotional nature of the news broadcast about Donbass: the characters “are very emotional [...] [the broadcast features] concerns, mimics, trembling face.” As Nina explains, emotions and “constant negative” tone in news makes her think that news about Ukraine is “deliberate propaganda.”

Identical and repeating nature of news broadcasts, absence of alternative news, and reliance on emotions are all used as cues to evaluate credibility. Specifically, these three elements are used to infer the nature of news as manufactured and unreliable. The heuristics at work here can be summarized as follows. *Clichés*: the logic dictates that realistic coverage will be diverse because it covers a diverse reality; therefore, identical coverage across time is likely to be an attempt to persuade, and the message is unreliable. *Absence of alternative views*: the logic dictates that there are different interpretations of such a contentious event as the Russia-Ukraine conflict; therefore, if only one interpretation is included in the news, others are excluded; the coverage is an attempt to persuade, and the message is unreliable. *Reliance on emotions*: emotional appeals is an attempt to persuade, and the message is unreliable. Social psychology demonstrates that if people are aware of being influenced, they are likely to resist influence. For instance, in a priming experiment, Strack and colleagues find that awareness of priming plays important role in processing information. If subjects are unaware of priming event, priming affects their judgment. If subjects are reminded of a priming event, no assimilation of information happens – subjects resist the priming effect (Strack et al., 1993). The logic underlying these three rules of thumb can be summarized as persuasive intent. As Metzger et al. argue, persuasive intent is the implication that there is “some sort of manipulation or ulterior motive on the part of the information provider, which negatively impacts credibility. This type of content seems to elicit an immediate defense mechanism that leads people to mistrust information without further scrutiny” (Metzger et al., 2010, p. 432). As it can be seen from TV viewers’ responses, the source of this

heuristic is daily life rather than specific institutional and political context of Russia. All three rules can be reduced to simplistic logic which is acquired through the course of socialization and education.

Politics and Authenticity Heuristics

Obviously, all news broadcasts watched by participants during focus group sessions involved politics. However, the same event framed as a part of political process or social process can lead to different interpretations by triggering different heuristics. In the framing of the events in Ukraine, Russian television often portrays protests in Kiev as a part of political process involving parties and politicians, while the referenda in Donbass are portrayed as non-political grassroots mobilization involving ordinary citizens not related to parties or politicians. These different frames have different impacts on viewers by triggering different heuristics. Non-political frames feature ordinary people, which increases credibility of broadcasts. As Yegor argues, “ordinary people” in news about Donbass look sincere: “I had a feeling that they just put an ordinary man in front of the camera... He does not talk smoothly, but he speaks clearly. It invokes trust.” They look sincere to participants because they seem to be similar to TV viewers in terms of their social position, concerns, and needs. As Yulia puts it, “You are at the same level with these people.” Since TV viewers recognize these citizens as relatable and similar to themselves, they think that they can understand the motives of the citizens presented in the news. As ordinary people, these citizens are unlikely to lie or manipulate information. As a result, this perceived similarity between TV viewers and ordinary citizens presented in news reports makes TV viewers conclude that news reports are credible.

However, this identification with relatable people hides more complex dynamics peculiar to the post-Soviet society. In addition to the same concerns and social position, “ordinary people” also occupy a similar position in relation to politics. As TV viewers, they are not involved in the political process. When asked to clarify the meaning of the phrase about “the same level,” Yulia proceeds: “I mean that he is not a political figure, that he is a person like you.” This comparison is based on the perception of politics as based on special interest and manipulation. The concerns of “ordinary people” are fundamentally opposed to special interest and manipulation. Their motivations include happiness, money, safety and are intrinsic to human nature. As Yuriy puts it, “I am not a fan of political news. Politics is dirt. It is the dirtiest business

in the world.” Instead, the demands of miners featured in the news about Donbass are framed as the expression of non-political interests. As a result, they are perceived as “normal” and “adequate.” As Ivan explains, “It is the demand of everyone. I think we also - us, you, - we want to get more, to be paid well.” Viewers build the opposition between this authentic interest and the political demands of Maidan protesters. As compared to the protests in Donbass, Maidan seems “Too politicized. There are parties [involved].” This difference rests on the idea that “ordinary people” are far from politics: “These people...Do any of us have understanding of what European Union is? [...] They [Maidan protesters] talk about the European Union as if they knew what they were going to join.” The political demands of Maidan are considered to be a result of political manipulation of elites because ordinary people are far from political agenda. Once seeing this opposition between political interest and authenticity, the moderator asks participants to conduct a mental experiment and imagine that Maidan protesters talk about their authentic social and economic interests instead of the abstract agenda of the European integration. The results are striking. As Kristina puts it, “It would be better, of course. It would be true [...] We would believe him, of course.”

The heuristic underlying these reactions can be formulated as follows: if the message involves political ideas, politicians, or parties, it probably advances special interests; therefore, it attempts to manipulate the viewer and should not be trusted; if the message involves ordinary people with non-political interests, it probably does not advance special interests; therefore, it does not attempt to manipulate the viewers and should be trusted. These two rules work together in concert. Politics as heuristic implies Authenticity as the opposite, and Authenticity as heuristic implies Politics as the opposite. Covering the protests in Maidan and Donbass, Russian TV plays on TV viewers’ disgust of politics by presenting the unwanted Maidan protests as political and desirable Donbass referenda as non-political. While the opposition between special interest and public interest is highly intuitive heuristic device acquired from daily life, the persistence and rigorous use of Politics and Authenticity heuristics by the participants points at its specific cultural nature. According to scholars of the post-Soviet society, the discrediting of official politics in the late Soviet Union resulted in the escape of individuals into private life and political “ethic of non-participation.” After a short burst of political activity in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the dissatisfaction with the results of the collapse of the Soviet Union and reforms following perestroika led to a new escape from politics (Belokurova & Vorobyev, 2019; Howard, 2003;

Prozorov, 2008). These factors cemented a very specific attitude to politics in post-Soviet Russia. Although short bursts of grassroots political activity happen from time to time in Russia, politics is mostly perceived as dangerous, dirty, manipulative, and unnecessary. Politics and Authenticity heuristics are being borrowed from this shared cultural repository.

Ownership Heuristic

The ownership of TV channels seems to be an important cue for inferring credibility of the news among participants, although it is used for both inferring credibility and putting it into question. For those who are more inclined to criticize Putin's regime, state ownership is a sign of unreliable information. For instance, responding to the statements about credibility of state-owned channels, Larisa responds saying that "Our channels are heavily criticized [exactly] because they are state-aligned [...] I would not say [...] federal channels are one hundred percent truthful." For TV viewers who are more inclined to support Putin's regime, state ownership of *Channel One* is a cue which indicates the credibility of the information. As Oxana argues, "I do not think that Channel One lies – they check information." Vasily provides more comprehensive explanation of why *Channel One* is perceived as credible: "You try to believe what TV says because it is state-owned channels. People [running them] are responsible [for information they disseminate] and occupy high positions." In essence, governmental channels are trusted more because the government is expected to apply rigorous fact-checking procedures.

The heuristics underlying these different uses of source ownership as cues can be formulated as follows: the state pursues its interests, therefore, information provided by the state is biased; the state ensures the quality of information, therefore, information provided by the state is credible. While the use of this heuristic seems obvious and logical, it is interesting to trace their source. The use of the state as a cue can be traced back to Hovland and Weiss' distinction between low- and high-credibility sources which are represented by a scientific journal and a state organization (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). It seems to fall under a more general authority heuristic which dictates that official sources are more likely to be credible. As Sundar argues, "A common finding across the credibility literature is that one of the major criteria for assigning credibility to a site is whether the source is an official authority or not" (Sundar, 2008, p. 84).

However, unlike the simple authority heuristic which dictates that official sources should be treated as more credible than unofficial ones, the state ownership heuristic as used by focus group participants also encapsulates the unique post-Soviet historical and political context. For some TV viewers, credibility of the state-owned sources is underlined by the memories of the Soviet times. For instance, responding to a question about credibility and state ownership, Vasily confirms this connection: “In general, yes [there is a connection between state ownership and credibility]. I would wish so...At least, it was true in the Soviet times.” As Sofia argues, “In the Soviet Union, they broadcasted calmer and kinder things.” Having spent a significant part of their lives in the Soviet Union or sharing the popular imagery of the “authoritative” and “serious” Soviet television, TV viewers use this experience as a cue to assess credibility of the news today. At the same time, Soviet memories are compared to the style of commercial channels during the period of intense intra-elite struggle and market competition in the 1990s. As Sonya puts it, “I don’t watch NTV [a commercial channel] because it is commercial.” For Sonya, commercial ownership automatically implies that private interests undermine unbiased reporting. Commercial channels seek to earn money. They use “something hot – the hotter the better.” As a result, all information appears to be “false, there is no truth [on commercial TV].” The news on commercial channels is “bought, they have certain intention [to promote financial interest of the owner].” The memories of both elite manipulation over media in the struggle against each other and highly sensationalized reporting in the 1990s are compared to the memories of calmer and authoritative styles of Soviet television.

For those who use state ownership as a cue to infer credibility, the reliance on this heuristic seems to be underlined by the contrasting of the Soviet Union and turbulent 1990s. They rely on memories and perception of the Soviet television as calm and authoritative, and the commercial channels of the 1990s as manipulative and sensationalist. Even though many focus group participants were born after the collapse of the Soviet Union or have a scant memory of the Soviet television, they seem to be sensitive to ownership cues. The perception of Soviet television as more authoritative and commercial channels of the 1990s as more sensationalist is also widely spread in the Russian post-Soviet culture and imagery.

5.5.2. The Role of Political Sophistication

When inquiring about heuristics, the moderator framed the questions in a way

that focused participants' attention on messages. Asking questions such as "are there any elements in this broadcast which you find credible?" or "are there any elements in this broadcast which make you skeptical about its credibility?" allowed me to identify the heuristics which are located at the basic level of intuitive reactions. Therefore, even if political sophisticates employ more complex reasoning, they share the same heuristics at the level of perception and first intuitive reactions as political novices. While sharing many intuitive heuristics with political novices, political sophisticates seem to be more sensitive to ownership heuristic than people not interested in politics.

The ownership heuristic is used differently by Putin supporters and participants who are openly critical of Putin's regime. For the critics of the Putin's regime, the ownership heuristic is used to draw a conclusion that television is a political tool which is used by elites to shape public opinion and keep the regime in power. In addition, they often use catchy political labels, such as propaganda or brainwashing, to challenge the reputation of Russian television. For instance, Alexander, a political sophisticate, claims that *Channel One* "exploits propaganda" and is used to "just stupefy people." It "brainwashes us" to advance the regime's agenda. In addition to confidence in the manipulative nature of Russian television, political sophisticates also link it to the agenda of the regime. For instance, Alexander jokingly says that "It [Channel One] is just DNR-TV." DNR-TV is an ironic abbreviation for "Donetsk People's Republic Television" he created. By saying so, he ironically reflects on the fact that *Channel One* pays too much attention to the Eastern Ukraine, the coverage of Channel One is overly sympathetic towards DNR, and the regime uses *Channel One* to manipulate public opinion and convince people in the legitimacy of the republic.

Pro-Putin supporters instrumentalize the ownership heuristic differently. They generally agree with the critics of the Putin's regime that Russian television in general and *Channel One* in particular are biased and manipulate information to advance the regime's strategic goals. For instance, Anton argues that "it is even silly to believe the news fully." The media are always biased by the political agendas of governments: "Ukraine protects its own [people], Russia protects its own [people]." However, unlike critics of the Putin's regime, Putin supporters accept the bias in the news on *Channel One*. They think that bias and manipulation in Russian TV news are a perfectly legitimate political tool. Since Putin supporters' political preferences align with the Russian government's goal, they consider the manipulation used to advance these goals as legitimate. For instance, when being asked about the credibility of *Channel*

One, Eduard responds that he trusts it because “the government supports it [Channel One], and it supports the government (...) it is under protection of the president.” At first glance, this use of the ownership heuristic can look similar to the one of political novices. However, instead of arguing that the state-owned TV channels are credible because the state ensures the quality of information, they link their trust in state-owned TV to the government’s political agenda and policy objectives. As Asya argues, she trusts TV news because “We have a strong state. It has strength and weight in international relations. That is why Channel One [can be trusted].” Table 6 summarizes all cues, heuristics’ assumption and rules of application, and sources.

Name	Cues	Assumption	Source
Divide by Two	---	All media are biased. Politics is too complex to understand; biased sources have to be compared, the interpretation events should be divided by two and compared to individual opinion;	Cultural Stereotypes
Violence Does Not Lie	images of violence	News can be fabricated; it is difficult to fabricate violence;	Daily Life
Professionalism in Appearance	good look and speech	Both skills in providing credible information and professional appearance result from professional training;	Daily Life
Two Heads Are Better than One	others, experts, witnesses	People with superior knowledge have greater understanding of events; witnesses have firsthand experience of events	Daily Life
Persuasive Intent	clichés absence of alternative views excessive emotions	The diverse reality will be reflected in the diverse coverage; identical coverage across time is an attempt to persuade; People have different views and interpretations; if only one view is included in the news, the coverage is an attempt to persuade; Emotional appeals are an attempt to persuade;	Daily Life
Ownership Heuristic	state or commercial ownership	The state pursues its interests; The state ensures the quality of information;	Cultural Stereotypes
Politics and Authenticity	political framing non-political framing	Political parties and politicians advance special interests; Ordinary people do not advance special interests	Cultural Stereotypes

Table 6 Heuristics, Cues, Sources

5.6. Conclusion

The analysis of credibility assessment strategies of participants presented above allows me to tap into the credibility assessment of Russian TV viewers. Based on the analysis of focus group discussions, I described TV viewers’ understanding of

objectivity as well as six heuristic strategies used to evaluate credibility of the news about the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The understanding of media credibility of participants is underlined by two beliefs. First, media credibility does not exist because media coverage is always biased and colored by special interests of owners. Second, it is impossible to understand the complicated hidden world of the post-Soviet elite politics. Given these difficulties, the only way to approximate the credibility of political news, at least relatively, is to compare sources with different biases, find a common denominator, and compare it to one's individual opinion. However, completely different psychological machinery is at work when TV viewers are asked to evaluate specific elements of news broadcasts and describe their subjective impressions. Based on their subjective reactions, I identified six heuristics, each with its own unique triggering cues and source: violence does not lie, professionalism in appearance, two heads are better than one, persuasive intent, politics and authenticity, and the ownership heuristic. These heuristics represent folk or common-sense psychology of Russian TV viewers - a set of if-then-else conditions which are used to make inferences about credibility depending on the presence of particular cues in a fast and effortless manner.

Given the qualitative nature of the research, these implications can only be formulated as provisional hints, due to methodological limitations. However, while not being strictly representative and lacking causal validity, my findings still afford some interesting insights into the inner workings of news reception and credibility assessment in Russia. Keeping these limitations in mind, these findings still allow me to draw several careful generalizations which are important both in terms of broader relevance, and more specifically for the post-Soviet society and the Russian context. First, my findings can contribute to the research on media credibility and news processing under an electoral authoritarian regime. People living in Russia are often portrayed as skillful and critical readers of media messages who do not trust news, are able to identify bias, and prefer to rely on themselves rather than the reputation of media or party messages to assess quality of political information (Mickiewicz, 2005, 2008). While participants uniformly agree on the biased nature of the Russian media and the need to read them critically, in practice they rely on a very situational toolkit of heuristics which is used for both inferring the credibility of *Channel One* news and challenging it. While being asked whether news can be trusted, participants overwhelmingly answered "no." While being asked whether this particular news broadcast looks trustworthy, they reported a variety of common-sense psychological

strategies which can be used both to establish credibility and to challenge it. The actual decision to trust or distrust it will be based on the presence, absence, and combination of such cues, as images of violence, appearance of journalists, opinions of others, ownership of a channel, clichés, alternative views, emotions, political or non-political framing. In short, as there is a gulf between reported and performed verification of information (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007). The general attitude to bias in the media and particular strategies of assessing credibility differ widely. People can think that the media are biased in general but trust particular messages or think that reliable information is reported in general, but distrust particular messages. This difference between the reported attitude to the media and actual strategies of establishing credibility should be considered in order to build a more detailed and plausible vision of credibility assessment under an electrical authoritarian regime.

In addition, scholars find that awareness of bias in media often naturally co-exists with support of an authoritarian regime in Russia. Citizens understand that the media are being manipulated but prefer or approve of manipulation for a variety of reasons. Specifically, they can be clearly aware and critical of manipulation in media but accept it as a part of the state-building enterprise (e.g., Hutchings & Rulyova, 2009; Oates, 2006). Among focus group participants, the combination of trust in state-aligned channels and awareness of bias of state-owned channels is a characteristic of small groups of participants – political sophisticates who are supportive of Putin's regime. These findings suggest that the image of the dual nature of citizens who combine trust with criticism in coherent attitudes can be limited and characterize only specific groups of people: political sophisticates who are more supportive of the regimes' policies. These findings can also be partly corroborated by the research on source cues. Previous research found that politically aware rather than politically unaware citizens are sensitive to source cues. For instance, Zaller (1992) notes that politically aware people find it easier to process political messages because they can build connections between news or policy issues and political preferences using source cues. Similarly, Shirikov (2021) found that only politically informed Russians can use source cues to draw conclusions about the credibility of the state-owned *Channel One* and the independent *Echo of Moscow*.

Second, these findings show how simple logical heuristics which are present across different political and cultural contexts are being reshaped by local contexts. ownership heuristic and politics and authenticity heuristic are of particular interest

here. On one hand, the ownership heuristic seems to be a version of the authority heuristic which dictates that official sources are more likely to be credible (Sundar, 2008). On the other, while overlapping with more general psychological rule, it is infused with Russian post-Soviet culture and meanings. TV viewers consider the information provided by the state as more credible not because it is a simple authority heuristic which dictates that official sources are more credible than unofficial ones. Rather, they rely on specific memories and perception of Soviet television as calm and authoritative and the commercial channels of the 1990s as manipulative and sensationalist. Similarly, political cues work differently in Russia. In democracies, people utilize political cues included in messages to infer credibility of political messages and learn about positions of candidates (Popkin, 1994; Rahn, 1993). Under electoral authoritarian regimes, party systems and ideological forces do not function as cognitive vehicles which can represent meaningful variety of political preferences and interests. Any political cue regardless of particular ideological orientation triggers suspicion and becomes a universal shortcut used to label information as unreliable. While political cues still function as cognitive signals in Russian context, they have come to represent the experience of suspicion towards politics and the belief that any political message is a form of covert manipulation.

Finally, these findings contribute to the understanding of how low-information rationality can work outside of democratic contexts. Media and political systems can be represented as a continuum with more or less useful conditions for utilizing low-information rationality. More entertainment-dominated and polarized market-based media systems give citizens fewer useful instruments to use as heuristics; less entertainment-dominated and polarized public service systems give citizens more useful instruments to use as heuristics. Political systems with more diverse political forces can give citizens more opportunities to find a party which fits one's political preferences (Downs, 1957) increasing the chances of using ideologies and party agendas as heuristics (Popkin, 1994) than less diverse political systems. Electoral authoritarian regimes are characterized by even less favorable conditions as political and media institutions are not perceived as independent and reliable. Conversely, citizens should rely the heuristics based on the political environment in authoritarian contexts even less.

Since political communication research is done in democracies more often than not, it is not quite clear how low-information rationality functions in the context in which

political and media institutions are not perceived as being authoritative and credible. Russia presents an excellent opportunity to produce some hints about this process. The striking feature of all respondents' strategies is that very few of them rely on the structure of contemporary political information environment, such as party structure, reputation of particular media sources, opinions of politicians and experts. Apparently, the heuristics drawn from the political environment are not very useful to make sense of political process. As Gigerenzer and Todd argue, heuristics constitute the mind's "adaptive toolbox" (Gigerenzer & Todd, 2000, p. 30). They adjust to specific features of the informational environment which proved to be useful for predicting outcomes and making inferences. Adapting to the political information environment in an authoritarian context, Russian TV viewers rely more on heuristics growing out of daily life and rely on common sense and cultural stereotypes. Essentially, looking for useful cues to decipher public affairs in the context where political and media institutions are not perceived as credible, people turn to common sense and cultural stereotypes which proved to be useful for understanding past events.

These findings may be relevant for other electoral authoritarian regimes as well. Due to political corruption and electoral fraud political institutions under electoral authoritarian regimes are often associated with distrust (Kostadionva, 2009; Martinez i Coma & Trinh, 2016; Simpser, 2012; Stockemer et al., 2012). Similarly, news media in authoritarian contexts are often associated with profound distrust. For instance, Szostek (2017) found that citizens believe that the news can never be fully trusted in Ukraine. Pjesivac et al. (2016) found that citizens believe that news can never be fully trusted and rely on personal experience in Croatia, Serbia, and Macedonia. Although all three countries are relatively democratic (Freedom House scores 85 (free), 66 (partly free), 63 (partly free)), media are still associated with the oppressive institutions of the totalitarian past and make citizens distrust news. Similarly, Truex (2016) found that Chinese citizens distrust news media and rely on personal experience to "back out bias" and discern truthful information even in slanted news. As my findings show, TV viewers prefer to rely on common sense and cultural experience exactly because of distrust in media and political institutions. Hence, these findings should be relevant for other electoral authoritarian regimes.

CHAPTER VI. HIGH-CHOICE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT AND FILTER BUBBLE EFFECT UNDER AN ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

6.1. Introduction

While the previous chapter explored how the availability of various political cues in the media and political environment can affect the heuristics used by TV viewers to navigate political information, this chapter focuses on how the use of different sources of information, such as TV news and various online sources, affects news reception under an electoral authoritarian regime. It seeks to address the third sub-question of this dissertation: How does the combination of TV news and online news affect citizens' opinions about politics under an electoral authoritarian regime? By analyzing cross-media diets of TV viewers and placing them within the context of the debate on high-choice media environments, I investigated how the government's control over many media sources at the same time affects TV viewers' political information processing to provide a better understanding of news processing in the high-choice media environment under an electoral authoritarian regime.

One of the main effects of the advent of high-choice media environments identified in the scholarly literature is increased polarization. Three types of polarization in high-choice media environments have been identified by scholars – the growing divide between politically interested citizens and those who prefer entertainment (Prior, 2007), the formation of the homogeneous “echo chambers” in which one's views are reinforced by the views of likeminded individuals (Sunstein, 2001), and the formation of personalized “filter bubbles” which are underlined by the algorithmic filtering of counter-attitudinal information (Pariser, 2011). The existing evidence suggests that the earlier concerns associated with the increased fragmentation of high-choice media environments are not justified. While scholars document increased divisions between politically interested citizens and those who prefer entertainment (e.g., Edgerly, 2015; Ksiazek et al., 2010; Prior, 2005, 2007; Strömbäck et al., 2013), both preference-based political fragmentation (“echo chamber”) and algorithm-based personalized political fragmentation (“filter bubble”) are found to be exaggerated. If media and political systems are at least partly diverse, they counterbalance these two types of polarization. Most people routinely consume

media content without a clear political agenda (Weeks et al., 2016) or media content with different political agendas both on TV and on social media (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Stroud, 2011). However, the diversity of media and political systems which prevent extreme polarization can vary across countries. While market-media systems, such as in the U.S. media sphere, are highly polarized, public service media systems significantly decrease polarization (Bos et al., 2016).

However, while some media and political systems in democracies can be quite polarized and characterized by less media diversity, electoral authoritarian regimes are characterized by even more strict control over media. While some media systems in authoritarian countries can be more diverse ideologically because of absence of liberal democratic consensus (Becker, 2004; Toepfl, 2013), generally authoritarian regimes tend to restrict media freedom more if they possess enough resources (Egorov et al., 2009; Gelhbach & Sonin, 2014). With the increased awareness of challenges and threats presented by digital media, many technology-savvy and resource-rich authoritarian regimes, such as China and Russia, have been experimenting with various techniques of control, such as blocking, filtering, surveillance, manipulating online public discussions, and attempt to control many media at the same time in a coordinated fashion (Deibert and Rohozinski, 2010; Greitens, 2013). For instance, the Russian government attempts to achieve full dominance over the informational space by controlling television (Lipman, 2009), online media (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014; Yablokov, 2015), social media and search engines (Linville & Warren, 2020; Stukal et al., 2017; Suslov, 2014), and news aggregators (Daucé, 2017; Sivetc, 2018; Wijermars, 2018).

This chapter investigates how this concerted pressure exercised over the different media in the high-choice media environment affects TV viewers' media diets and interpretation of political information. I argue that this strategy has different effects on more and less politically engaged TV viewers. Politically engaged TV viewers are active information seekers. They find information which reinforces their views despite the government's attempts to control the online sphere. For politically disengaged participants, this strategy produces the orchestrated filter bubble effect which verifies and reinforces the messages of the state-controlled television. While the tendency to algorithmic *personalized* filter bubbles in market-based media systems is underlined by the complex interaction between citizens' preferences and algorithm-assisted filtering of media content, this tendency is partially alleviated by the diversity of other

content with different political agendas. In Russia, concerted and direct pressure over many media reduces diversity leading to the artificially created *orchestrated* filter bubble effect which is underlined by the state control rather than personalization. This filter bubble effect is imposed in top-down fashion by the state and used to reinforce the messages of the state-controlled television.

The chapter is structured as follows. I first categorize TV viewers' cross-media news repertoires. The categorization is followed by the analysis of three news repertoires. Participants with the broadcast repertoire rely on television exclusively. Participants with broadcast-oriented and digital-oriented news repertoires are both active TV viewers and active Internet users but have a different level of interest in politics. While participants in the digital-oriented news repertoire are active information seekers, participants with the broadcast-oriented news repertoire are ready to acquire political information only if political information is easily available. I analyzed how different motivation to acquire political information is reflected in their media diets and, subsequently, the ways they interpret the news. Finally, I conclude the chapter by discussing how the findings contribute to the research on high-choice media environments and better understanding of how the use of multiple sources of information, such as TV news, social media, and news aggregators, affects news processing in authoritarian contexts.

6.3. Data from Focus Group Participants

To analyze cross-media news consumption of participants, I used the concept of a news repertoire. The idea of news (or channel) repertoire was introduced by Heeter in the mid-1980s (Heeter, 1985). With the expansion of cable television, the first stage of the formation of high-choice environments, it appeared that viewers form an attachment to sets of preferred channels while ignoring others. As Taneja and colleagues put it, news repertoires are strategies used to “cope with the abundance of choice” (Taneja et al., 2012, p. 952). In modern high-choice media environments, news repertoires have become an even more crucial tool since the number of information channels available has increased dramatically (e.g., Edgerly, 2015; Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012; Prior, 2007). Simply put, news repertoire is a combination of preferred sources that news participants rely on to receive news about public affairs. Based on

focus group data and a short survey, I inductively identified several news repertoires⁹.

- 1) *Broadcast Repertoire* (28 participants; TV: primary, news and entertainment; Internet: secondary, entertainment only). This group is older than other participants and includes more women. This news repertoire includes TV which is used both for news and entertainment. Most participants watch television news daily. They prefer news over entertainment slightly more often than other participants. While these participants use the Internet daily for non-news purposes, only a few reported using the Internet and social media for news. Only one participant mentioned a specific news media outlet. No one mentioned news aggregators.
- 2) *Broadcast-oriented Repertoire* (19 participants; TV: primary, news and entertainment; Internet: secondary, news and entertainment; news aggregators). This group is younger than the previous one and balanced in terms of gender. This news repertoire includes TV which is used both for news and entertainment. Most participants watch television news daily, although some participants watch it several times per week. Almost all participants in this group use the Internet and use it for news more often than the previous group: three-quarters report using the Internet for news and a half report using social media for news. However, only a quarter remember one specific online news outlet used. Instead, they occasionally use search engines to complement television news and rely on news aggregators which were mentioned by all participants in this group.
- 3) *Digital-oriented Repertoire* (9 participants; Internet: primary, news and entertainment; TV: secondary, news and entertainment; specific online news media outlets and social media). This group is significantly younger than other participants and includes more college students. It is also exclusively male, due to the small sample size. This news repertoire includes the Internet which is used for both news and entertainment as a primary source of information. Almost all participants reported using the

⁹ It is important to note that since the study was originally designed to understand how people process TV news, focus group participants were pre-screened to make sure that they pay at least some attention to TV news. People who avoid TV news completely were not included in the selection by definition.

Internet and social media for news. Unlike other participants, they can recall many online news outlets, such as *Meduza*, *Lenta.ru*, and *Vedomosti* among others. TV is also used for news and entertainment, but as a secondary source. Participants in this group watch television much less often than all other participants.

News repertoires are summarized in Table 7. Additional information about particular news diets can be found in Appendix B.

	TV	Internet	Number
Broadcast Repertoire	Primary: news and entertainment	Secondary: entertainment only	28 participants
Broadcast-oriented Repertoire	Primary: news and entertainment	Secondary: news and entertainment. News aggregators; search engines	19 participants
Digital-oriented Repertoire	Secondary: news and entertainment	Primary: news and entertainment. Particular news media, social media	9 participants

Table 7 TV Viewers' Cross-Media Diets

6.3.1. Broadcast Repertoire

Participants in this group rely on television news and generally consider it to be credible. For instance, Vasiliy explains that state-owned television provokes trust because the government “is responsible for the credibility of information.” Relying on state-aligned television, participants with this repertoire are receptive to the main regime narratives propagated via television news, such as representation of protests in Kiev as disorder orchestrated by the West and referenda in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine as a protection of the Russian-speaking population (Lankina and Watanabe, 2017). On one hand, participants understand the events that happened during the Maidan protests in Kiev as a “bedlam” (Nadezhda) with “provoked violence” (Yekaterina). They believe that these were “foreigners who [...] provoked this in the previous days” (Valentina). Participants blame the Ukrainian government for allowing the U.S. government to control Ukraine and turn it into an “America’s gas station” (Valentina). On the other hand, referenda and separatism in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine are understood as a legitimate reaction of the Russian-speaking population to Ukraine’s aggression. Participants believe that Russia-backed militias “defend their own way of life and the desire to live on their own land” against the Ukrainian army which has turned against them and “shoots at their [Russian-speaking population’s] children” (Galina). Not surprisingly, participants with this repertoire generally support

the current Russian government. For instance, Yana would like to see “a leader as good as our Putin” in Ukraine who could stabilise the situation.

While participants in this group use the Internet for non-news purposes, they are uncomfortable with online news. The complexity of the saturated online environment makes participants “trust television [rather than the Internet] in reporting what actually happens” (Natalia). Moreover, with little experience of consuming online news, participants also consider the Internet to be a danger. They believe that exposing Internet users with “too volatile personalities and too critical attitudes” (Sonya) to uncensored information can provoke “a wave of rallies” (Natalia) considered by participants as a threat to political stability. As a result, they believe that it is “right to filter information” on the Internet (Sonya). Nisbet et al. (2017) show that authoritarian regimes can use state-aligned TV channels to frame the Internet as a threat and increase support for online censorship among less experienced Internet users. State-aligned television news shapes not only participants’ perception of politics, but also their perception of the Internet.

6.3.2. Broadcast-oriented Repertoire

The abundance of information provided by the Internet demands more time and effort from users to find, select, and assess information. As a result, users must develop a complicated set of tools to assess information without investing effort and time (Metzger et al., 2010). Participants in this group rely on two strategies of looking for news online and assessing information – news aggregators and the leading role of TV news. This group largely overlaps with politically disengaged participants who rely on accessibility as mechanism to make sense of the news described in the previous chapters.

Many participants in this group emphasize the burden of information seeking in contrast to the less cognitively demanding television news. As Yulia explains, television news typically has “only one opinion,” while there are too “many diverse points of view” on the Internet. It is difficult to tame “a very large flow of information on the Internet” where “everything is changing very quickly.” This change in the information environment works in tandem with the natural tendency to economize on resources and time while engaging in complex tasks, such as information searching. Actively searching for information is too costly for participants in this group. As Ksenia argues, “I am too lazy for this [searching for information].” Participants with the

broadcast-oriented repertoire use two strategies for searching for and evaluating information: they rely on news aggregators and the scheduled programming of TV news.

As a result, the users in this group tend to rely on news aggregators. As Szostek argues, “non-news affordances” often drive news selection (Szostek, 2017). News aggregators offer a very convenient opportunity to simplify information searches because they integrate newsfeeds with many other functions, such as search engines and e-mail. Participants from this group often emphasize the ease-of-access aspect of their information search practices. As Anna says, she gives “a cursory reading” of aggregators’ news. In the context of economizing on time and resources, news aggregators are a perfect addition to pragmatic strategies of passive users: they allow them to consume news and to avoid investing effort in looking for news at the same time. Looking for the news independently would require more time and effort. Instead, a pre-made selection of news is offered to a user right away eliminating any need for information search. Participants from this group often emphasize this aspect of their information search practices. As Ksenia argues, “I only read news when I am checking my e-mail—when there is something on Mail or Yandex [the main Russian news aggregators] [...] because you have little time for reading news.” Similarly, Larisa argues that she reads either *Yandex News* because it is “on the top” of website, i.e., easily accessible, or “popping up news” offered by various websites. Inna notes that she mostly uses *Yandex News* and *Mail.ru* to find news “quickly.” Like the findings of Dellacorras et al. (2015), they often satisfy their interest in public affairs by simply reading headings and short snippets. As Boris explains, “I do not read it attentively, only headings [of the news in Yandex News]. I do not go into detail.”

Another strategy to simplify information search online is to rely on TV news and to use the Internet as a supplementary source. As Mitchelstein and Boczkowski argue, “audience members may integrate consumption of different media (...) using the internet to search for in-depth information about an issue they initially learned via print or broadcast media” (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010, p. 1093). Many participants mentioned this strategy. As Kirill argues, “if the topic is interesting, you will [...] start digging [...] if doesn’t catch attention, why would I need it [to look for information] whatsoever?” Similarly, Olga says she uses information online to complement TV news:

If there was a story about particular event, then I try to analyze the cause. This

year French journalists were shot in Paris by Arabs; several people were killed – it is a story about particular events. Then I started reading articles on the Internet: the articles explaining the cause, caricatures. [Then I] found out the whole story about the editors who were warned.

TV news clearly has a leading role in the described situation. Olga started looking for information online only after her initial interest was sparked by TV news. Importantly, TV news sets the agenda for the described situation. In Olga's case, she only started looking for information online after her initial interest was sparked by TV news. Similar to news aggregators, TV news helps to simplify information searches and dealing with the abundance of information online. TV news cues users and focus attention on particular issues they may want to check online to get additional information.

Relying on the scheduled programming of TV news and news aggregators are powerful and convenient strategies which help to deal with information abundance. In the context of the partly controlled online sphere, the combination of TV news with news aggregators and search engines can lead to the biased image of politics and society. When looking for additional information through search engines, TV viewers often find stories in state-controlled online media. Similarly, since news aggregators in Russia are exposed to political pressures (Daucé, 2017; Sivetc, 2018; Wijermars, 2018), they typically include references to state-aligned sources. Because the information found in Russian news aggregators and state-aligned online news does not contradict TV news, it is not surprising that participants overwhelmingly report that TV news and online news are consistent and do not contradict each other. As Tatiana says, "I only watch the news on TV and on the Internet. They are mostly similar. Mostly the same information." Similarly, Andrey says "I repeat: Channel One or ORT say the same thing as Yandex, Mail.ru or Lenta.ru. I have not noticed any inconsistencies or contradictions." Victor argues that "TV, Lenta.ru, Yandex News – approximately the same." Similarly, Nikolay argues that "all information is quite objective and consistent. [There can be inconsistencies] in particular stories only [but not in reporting news in general]." If there are contradictions, they are considered to be minor and insignificant: as Ilya states, "if they contradict each other, if they differ from each other, it is only minimal." Similarly, Veronica says that TV and online sources can have "Slightly differently angles. Emphasis can be shifted a little bit but not much, only a little." Boris explains that he can allow himself to read "only headings" exactly because the information he finds online and on TV "is the same" and he does not "see any

contradictions [in different sources]. They say the same things.” “Approximately the same,” “no contradictions,” “no inconsistencies,” – are common narratives about comparing TV and online news.

The practices of relying on news aggregators to complement TV news and on TV news as a guide for looking for additional information allows TV viewers to use consistency as a heuristic for veracity. This simple logical rule dictates: “If others agree it’s correct, then it’s probably credible” (Metzger et al., 2010: 429). When the moderator asks a question about credibility in the context of multiple contradicting sources of information, Veronica replies: “[I will believe] those sources which match, coincide [in reporting information].” In the following excerpt, Nikolay jumps from the consistency across sources heuristic to agreeing with the official narrative of Russian TV news:

All information is too objective and consistent to provoke arguments, reporting in all sources is the same. There is no point in making something up, maybe only in some single separate episodes. Like killing militia members – but these are particular details [...] In general, I have the feeling that we are all moving towards the same goal, political idea; we will win. On the side of republics – DPR and LPR – pro-Nazi power will leave.

This statement mirrors the Kremlin’s official narrative on the Russia-Ukraine conflict which sympathetically frames separatist regions as grassroots mobilizations opposing far-right forces which gained power in Ukraine. Since information in news aggregators and on TV news is identical, the consistency heuristic verifies the validity of the Kremlin’s narrative conveyed through TV news.

6.3.3. Digital-oriented Repertoire

While some Internet users had to develop complex strategies for dealing with information abundance, those few who are genuinely interested in public affairs got the opportunity to learn as much as they want. They, as Prior puts it, found “a candy store” on the Internet (Prior, 2007, p. 14). Participants with the digital-oriented repertoire indicate that they rely on more active strategies for their information searches. This group includes both participants who are supportive of Putin’s regime and those who are highly critical of it. These participants often show more familiarity with the media sphere and specific online news media. Unlike other participants, they can recall and name many specific online newspapers and news websites, such as the independent *Vedomosti*, *RBK*, *Meduza*, and the state-aligned *LifeNews*, *RIA*

Novosti, *Lenta*, etc. Many of them stated that they used social media and blogs to search for information during the conflict. This group partly overlaps with the politically engaged participants who rely on consistent political schemas and demonstrate applicability effect described in the previous chapters. These participants are more politically sophisticated – they know more about both domestic and international politics and remember recent political events. Also, they often show more sophisticated knowledge of both politics and media during focus groups. For instance, most focus groups participants share the idea that media cannot be trusted fully because the coverage is always determined by some political or economic interest. However, only participants with a digital-oriented repertoire can correctly name the owners of media outlets. When one of the participants claims that viewers should also know what oppositional Internet channel *Dozhd* is broadcasting, Alexander, sarcastically replies that *Dozhd*'s belonging to the opposition is questionable because “it belongs to Gazprom-media,” government-affiliated big business. Such participants use various sources for information search.

The information search strategies of the participants with the digital-oriented repertoire are also different from those with the broadcast-oriented repertoire. First, instead of using news aggregators, they rely mainly on social media, blogs, and online news sites. For instance, Sergey claims that he uses “The Internet and Livejournal [a Russian blogging platform]” to search for information about the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Similarly, Alexander searches through discussions and videos in the pro-separatist group “Donetsk. Lugansk. Novorossia” to receive information about the military confrontation. These groups are “huge, they contained everything [about the conflict]. Facts, statistics, links to other sources.” He proceeds: “it is only after that I was noticing that there was some information on TV news too [...] I saw a lot of omissions—the information I was finding on social media was lacking on TV news.” Compared to the previous group, the participants with the digital-oriented repertoire use the information found on the Internet to evaluate TV news rather than TV news to evaluate information found on the Internet. Finally, the users in this group often have a wide network of other political sophisticates whom they know personally or online. As Sergey argues, “I [personally] know people [who can be a reliable source of information about the conflict] [...] I do not know people in Syria [...] but Ukraine – I have sources who can provide reliable information.”

Do active information seeking strategies of participants with digital-oriented

repertoire help them to develop more objective and balanced view of the conflict? In most cases, they do not. While the understanding of the conflict of participants with the broadcast-oriented repertoire is defined by TV news and reinforced by news aggregators and situational use of search engines, the understanding of the conflict of participants with the digital-oriented repertoire is predefined by their political preferences. In most cases, they find information that confirms their schemas.

For instance, Alexander is an active supporter of the Russian government and a vocal critic of the Ukrainian government. He harshly criticizes the involvement of the West in Ukrainian domestic politics: “What is your [Western countries’] business [in Ukraine]? Why don’t you come to other countries to join protests, say, to Russia?” Alexander thinks that TV news in Russia is “more credible in Russia than in Ukraine and the United States.” Finally, he considers the war in Donbass to be an insurrection of people who “fight for their interests which are similar to Russia.” These views largely coincide with the official narrative on the Russia-Ukraine conflict provided by Russian TV news. His views are also consistent with the agenda of the online sources which he uses. As he says, “I read the news in [public] groups about Luhansk and Donetsk on social media.” In particular, he mentions the group “Donetsk. Lugansk. Novorossia” and the left pro-government anti-Ukrainian blogger Colonel Cassad. Such groups and bloggers have a clear, pro-governmental ideology. The information from these groups is likely to reinforce his opinion about the nature of the conflict.

Sergey, another political sophisticate, mentions that his political views were formed decades ago at university. He is a vocal critic of Russian media and government. He cannot “stand [TV] news” and believes that “federal channels [...] exploit propaganda” and “hide facts.” According to Sergey, watching TV news is equal to “brainwashing yourself” because the government actively manipulates people. At the same time, he believes that TV news’ focus on Ukraine and external enemies is a maneuverer which helps the government to shift attention from “real corruption and [political] inaction” in the country. These views are likely to be reinforced by his preferred online media sources. When discussing information search, he mostly mentions “alternative [to TV news] sources,” such as Livejournal and personal contacts. His very sharp anti-government sentiment seems to be confirmed by the information he receives from the Internet. What he found in Livejournal, for example, is the confirmation that “they [the government] try to hammer into the heads [of viewers] the idea that there are only enemies and nationalists around [in Ukraine].”

The information from these sources is likely to reinforce rather than challenge his opinion about the nature of the conflict. Unlike participants with the broadcast-oriented repertoire whose perceptions are determined by TV news and reinforced by news aggregators and state-aligned online news media, participants with the digital-oriented repertoire choose sources based on their political preferences. Instead of relying on the feeling of consistency across sources which results from passive information from search strategies, they selectively expose themselves to information which reinforces their views (Bennet and Iyengar, 2008).

6.4. Conclusion

I turn now to implications of the data presented in the analysis for the process of news reception in a high-choice media environment for Russian politics and media in particular and for electoral authoritarian regimes in general. Based on the data, I identified three news repertoires. 1) TV viewers with a *digital-oriented repertoire* rely on television news and complement it with online news media, social media, and search engines. As a result, they actively search online for information and can partially circumvent the regime's framing of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in TV news. However, they also look for information based on their political preferences and rely on sources which are ideologically consistent with their views. In other words, they demonstrated clear signs of selective exposure (Bennet & Iyengar, 2008; Lazarsfeld, 1944; Stroud, 2014). 2) TV viewers with a *broadcast repertoire* use the Internet for pragmatic purposes but rely exclusively on TV news for political information. As a result, they escape the effect of synchronized reporting in TV news and digital media but are receptive to the regime's narratives about the Russia-Ukraine crisis due to their heavy reliance on television. 3) Participants with a *broadcast-oriented repertoire* are in between in terms of the intensity of their use of digital media. They rely on television for political information but complement it with news aggregators or stories in state-aligned online news media found via search engines. As a result, they encounter identical information across media, overwhelmingly report that information in television news and various digital media is similar and conclude that the reporting of regime-controlled television is credible.

These findings offer a number of insights into the nature of political communication in Russia. "Computational propaganda" or "the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully distribute misleading information"

(Woolley & Howard, 2017, p. 3) has recently become a burgeoning area of research. My findings demonstrate the specific mechanisms through which “computational propaganda” is exercised in Russia and show that it can perform a variety of functions which are not reducible to direct persuasion. For instance, some scholars implicate Russian news aggregators in the filtering out of information which disagrees with the narratives of the Russian government rather than seeking to persuade citizens directly (Daucé, 2017). Similarly, networks of automated bots on social media can be used to promote the stories of specific news media outlets and channels in the rankings of search engines rather than to convince citizens directly (Stukal et al., 2017). However, there is no evidence which would show how this strategy affects the individual psychology of news reception.

I show that news aggregators and online news media can affect citizens through consistency heuristic which can be summed up as: “If others agree it’s correct, then it’s probably credible” (Metzger et al., 2010, p. 429). As a result, they perform intuitive contextual verification by comparing TV news with information on news aggregators and in state-aligned online news media (Meola, 2004; Metzger, 2007). However, contextual verification requires a proper context which can be used to verify information. Since the information found in these sources is homogenous and does not contradict TV news, this verification produces the effect which is opposite to the critical evaluation of TV news. My data suggest that state-controlled television news, online news media, and news aggregators in Russia form a media ecology with a complicated division of labor: while TV news broadcasts are responsible for spreading political narratives, news aggregators and state-controlled online news media are responsible for attracting additional attention and reinforcement of these narratives. To what extent can these findings be generalized to other authoritarian regimes? In the recent decade, many authoritarian regimes have been experimenting with the tools to control the online sphere (Greitens, 2013), such as blocking, filtering, censoring content online, and attempting to shape online public discussions (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010; King et al., 2013). However, the regime’s capacity to shape the media sphere crucially depends on the resources available (Egorov et al., 2009). Hence, these findings should be relevant for resource-rich autocrats, such as Russia and China, which possess considerable resources and are ready to invest them in advanced techniques of control.

Finally, these findings are of special interest in the context of research on

algorithmic polarization. Participants with the broadcast-oriented repertoire demonstrate what can be called the orchestrated filter bubble effect. The previous research on filter bubbles in democracies shows that the concerns associated with filter bubbles appear to be exaggerated: the effect of filtering on the diversity of consumed news is modest, and algorithms actually increase, rather than limit, the sheer amount of content users are exposed to (Flaxman et al. 2016; Fletcher and Nielsen 2018; Haim et al. 2018). Fletcher and Nielsen call this phenomenon “automated serendipity.” Since users’ news repertoires are often quite narrow, algorithms increase, rather than decrease, the likelihood of incidental exposure to information from other parts of the political spectrum (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018). However, in authoritarian contexts in which the diversity of political content may be reduced by governmental interference, “automated serendipity” may not be as efficient in producing the laudable results it does in democracies. My findings show that this strategy can result in an *orchestrated* filter bubble effect which is different from the *personalized* filter bubble studied in the context of polarization in democracies (Pariser, 2011). The tendency of algorithmic media to filter out preferences-inconsistent content in politically diverse systems is underlined by the complex interaction between citizens’ preferences, media content, and algorithm-assisted filtering of media content based on citizens’ preferences. Rather than offering content based on users’ prior clicks and search behavior, the orchestrated filter bubble effect experienced by my focus group participants was imposed in a top-down fashion by the state and based on the agenda of state-controlled television. The findings show that the multiplication of media sources which results from the advent of high-choice media environments can have different effects on political communication depending on specific political and institutional settings.

CHAPTER VII. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore the following research questions: How do citizens make sense of TV news under an electoral authoritarian regime? The secondary research questions were: 1) How do citizens form opinions based on information from TV news under an electoral authoritarian regime? 2) How do citizens evaluate the credibility of TV news under an electoral authoritarian regime? 3) How does the combination of TV news and online news affect citizens' opinions about politics in an electoral authoritarian regime? This chapter summarizes the main empirical findings of the dissertation and explains answers to these questions. This chapter is structured as follows. I first summarize the research problems and the main argument stated in the introduction. Then I summarize the main empirical findings of each chapter. The summary of empirical findings is followed by a discussion of the contributions of these findings to various research fields and areas of public debate. After discussing the contributions, I consider directions for further research and provide research-informed reflection on the current status of Russian media, politics, and citizenry.

7.1. Summary of the Main Argument

This dissertation used focus groups as the method to gather data to address the issue of news processing in contemporary Russia. On one hand, this study sought to contribute to a scarce area of the research on news processing in Russia. While there have been many studies of content and production of television messages in Russia, few scholars have attempted to analyze how audiences make sense of television news. Given shrinking media diversity and the intensity of the government's attempts to manipulate the public agenda since the start of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2013, this task has become even more urgent. While "Russian propaganda" has attracted disproportionately large attention of both domestic and international observers, little is known about how the coverage of the conflict on Russian television is perceived and processed by TV viewers with different backgrounds and political opinions. However, in addition to simply adding one more piece to the puzzle of news processing in Russia, this dissertation uses Russian TV viewers' processing of news about the Russia-Ukraine conflict as a case study to engage with a number of broader academic discussions. Specifically, this study used focus groups with Russian TV

viewers in an attempt to enrich the current knowledge about news processing under electoral authoritarian regimes. While many studies have investigated news processing across authoritarian regimes, scholars have mostly focused on how, why, and under what conditions citizens trust or distrust news. While authoritarian regimes provide fewer incentives to see political engagement as a meaningful activity, the influence of political engagement – a critical resource which determines whether citizens can consciously and meaningfully engage with media and political information – on news processing in authoritarian contexts has rarely been an object of analysis. As most authoritarian regimes transitioned to high-choice media environments in which abundant online sources crucially mediate the influence of broadcasting television, the question has become even more complex.

This study addresses these issues by using Russia as an example of an electoral authoritarian regime and by analyzing Russian TV viewers' news processing through the framework of political communication, political science, and psychology. Ultimately, this study is informed by the key tenets of the cognitive revolution which dictate that people adapt to circumstances by choosing (albeit unconsciously) the most beneficial cognitive strategies in a given context. As a preeminent political psychologist Philip Tetlock (2000) suggested, people are better thought of as cognitive managers rather than as cognitive misers. Instead of always choosing the least effortful cognitive strategies, they “deploy mental resources strategically as a function of the perceived importance and tractability of the problem” (p. 240). Hence, people can invest more mental resources in an activity if they feel that it is important, and their actions can yield tangible outcomes. Authoritarian environments rarely create stimuli and conducive environment for political learning. Specifically, electoral authoritarian regimes are often characterized by political corruption and absence of competitive politics, constrain media freedom, restrict uncontrolled political participation, and even deliberately demobilize voters during controlled elections. I have relied on the assumption that these conditions crucially affect three essential prerequisites which are necessary for citizens' meaningful engagement with news and politics. Electoral authoritarian regimes affect *incentives* to acquire political information and engage with the news. While there are small minorities of citizens who lean towards politics due to motivation which originates in individual political socialization, most citizens need to have the perception that political learning can have tangible effects. To borrow some of Anthony Downs' insights (1957), those citizens are rationally ignorant. Their

rationality consists of minimizing the effort invested in learning and processing information. Thus, they acquire information only when its benefits outweigh the cost of learning it. When political participation is constrained, and politics is not competitive, citizens understand that acquiring political knowledge can hardly influence elites' decision and rationally chose to invest in other activities, which have more tangible outcomes. In addition, electoral authoritarian regimes affect *cognitive tools*, which help citizens to make sense of news and political information. Contemporary media environments bombard citizens with astonishing amounts of information (Feng et al., 2015; Graber, 1988). To deal with this endless information flow, individuals have to rely on heuristics and various information shortcuts, such as opinions of politicians, parties, and media organizations. However, under electoral authoritarian regimes, political and media institutions are often associated with profound skepticism. As a result, opinions of parties or media organizations are often not considered independent and authoritative enough to be used as heuristics. Finally, electoral authoritarian regimes constrain *opportunities* to easily acquire politically diverse information in the news. In the context of the advent of high-choice media environments, the diversity of political content in media is one of the key factors which can counterbalance the increased political polarization of the public. While high-choice media environments present a challenge for authoritarian regimes by multiplying the number of available media sources, autocrats still attempt to control the media to make the information space as homogenous as possible to convey their agendas. As a result, media consumers in high-choice media environments under authoritarian regimes often encounter the news which are multiple but not diverse.

I argue that the absence of incentives to engage with political information, the environment which does not give useful cognitive tools to process political information, and partly homogeneous information spaces which do not provide politically diverse content result in a set of distinct processes and strategies underlying the news processing of the Russian TV viewer. The results of this study show how these three features of an electoral authoritarian regime are reflected in the individual political psychology of Russian TV viewers and news processing. First, although there is a small group of politically engaged participants, most participants in the study were politically disengaged. Political disengagement translates into a very specific way of making sense of TV news and forming opinions about politics. With no coherent political schemas, TV viewers deal with political information the best they can. They

process the news by mobilizing the most accessible considerations. As a result, their opinions contain both critical and supportive reactions towards media and the regime. Although they are dissatisfied with the life under an authoritarian regime and have many critical ideas, they cannot articulate them as consistent opinions. Second, in dealing with news and political information, they find little help from heuristics provided by the political environment, such as ideology, party agendas, and reputation of media sources. As political and media institutions are not seen as independent and authoritative, TV viewers understand that information generated by these institutions cannot be used as reliable shortcuts to navigate political information. As a result, while evaluating TV news, TV viewers cannot entrust media and political institutions with the job of interpreting public affairs. Instead of reputation of media organization or opinions of parties and politicians, they prefer to rely on other heuristics which seem more reliable, such as common sense and cultural stereotypes. In addition, the actual heuristics they use to evaluate credibility of news are very different from how they conceptualize credibility. Although they report very high distrust towards media, they can trust or distrust particular messages depending on a combination of various cognitive strategies and cues. Finally, as TV viewers have to navigate the high-choice media environment, they are bombarded with an astonishing amount of information. As most participants are politically disengaged, they cannot engage in the detailed analysis of information and perform a quick and intuitive cross-verification by comparing multiple sources. As the government attempts to control many media at the same time via both algorithmic and non-algorithmic tools, this cross-verification confirms TV news agenda. In essence, due to absence of motivation to actively search for information and learn about politics, they find themselves in the orchestrated filter bubble which is used to advance and reinforce TV messages.

7.2. News Processing Under an Electoral Authoritarian Regime

This argument allows me to both critically re-evaluate the findings of previous research on news processing in Russia and to use Russia as a case study to contribute to the research on news processing under electoral authoritarian regimes. The analysis of news processing in Russia does not form a coherent picture. While regular public opinion polls show a close relationship between exposure to state-aligned media and susceptibility to regime narratives (e.g., Volkov, 2015), scholars

report more ambivalent findings and diverge in their estimations of how much capacity and inclination Russian citizens have to interpret news critically. Some scholars show that the use of state-aligned sources, such as TV, increases the agreement with the official narrative of the state and vote for the party in power (Enikopolov et al., 2011; Sirotkina & Zavadskaya, 2020; Shirikov, 2019; Szostek, 2017a; White & Oates, 2003). Some scholars report that citizens are able to perform critical analysis of political information and identify political bias in news in Russia (Mickiewicz, 2005; 2008). Other scholars hypothesize that these contradictory reactions to the media can co-exist and propose explanations for this ambivalence. Citizens can be aware of manipulation in media, but they accept this bias and trust news for a variety of reasons, such as fear of economic and political malaise or nostalgic feelings for Soviet television (Hutchings & Rulyova, 2009; Oates, 2006). What is the reason for this divergence in estimations, and what capacity and inclination do Russian citizens have to interpret news critically? While there are vast differences between these studies in terms of methodology, and time periods, research questions and subjects, I argue that this variation can be partly attributed to the instability and contradictions which are inherent to the audience itself and caused by little interest in politics. Much like these latter theories, I show that critical and supportive reactions can co-exist in TV viewers' heads. However, I argue that previous scholarship has not paid enough attention to the role of political engagement and psychological mechanisms which crucially mediate news processing. Ignoring psychological foundations of news processing, scholars treat TV viewers as if they had coherent opinions akin to sophisticated ideologues, not regular TV viewers. I have provided two explanations for the existence of this ambivalence: the incoherent nature of political ideas which results from little political engagement and the gap between TV viewers' explicit ideas and heuristics used for evaluating news which are largely intuitive and automatic.

On one hand, the instability which is inherent in TV viewers' reactions results from little political engagement. Some of the TV viewers in this study are political sophisticates. They knowingly accept political bias in the media because it fits their political preferences, as described by previous scholars. Most of them do not have enough interest in politics to think these ideas through and integrate them into a coherent attitude. My findings suggest that the reason for this co-existence of supportive and critical reactions towards the regime and the media is political disengagement rather than coherent attitudes shaped by cultural or historical legacies.

Distrusting but knowingly accepting biased news requires integrating these two attitudes into a coherent whole. Instead, most of the focus group participants had no coherent political schemas. As Mickiewicz argues, abstract political issues for such TV viewers are “isolated from the richness of the experiences that figure so prominently in daily information processing” (Mickiewicz, 2008, p. 71, 78). Similar to findings of Savin et al. (2018), these participants can be called the “inadvertent audience”: interested enough in politics to follow the news, but not interested enough to form stable opinions. Just as Walter Lippmann’s Ms. Sherwin of Gopher Prairie who tried to imagine military engagements between French and German soldiers during World War I as a personal duel between general Joffre and German Kaiser (Lippmann, 1922, p. 12), they processed political information by building bridges between news and whatever knowledge they had at hand: from personal experience and previous news reports to opinions of friends and colleagues. Since these ideas are stored in different layers of memory and are not united by overarching schemas, the answers of my informants regarding trust in media or support for the regime are highly dependent on contingent factors, such as the wording of questions or recent experiences. These factors make some ideas more easily retrievable from memory and can help account for both divergence in estimations of how much capacity Russians have to interpret news critically among scholars and give an alternative perspective on findings of scholars who emphasize the ambivalence of TV viewers’ opinions.

On the other hand, I show that this ambivalence can result from the gap between explicit ideas and automatic and intuitive heuristics for making sense of the news. My findings suggest that there is a gulf between what TV viewers say about TV news and what they really do when they evaluate TV news. Critical attitude does not translate into critical practice easily. While being aware of the authoritarian nature of the political system, participants think that news should not be trusted. At the same time, in practice they rely on a very situational toolkit of heuristics which are used for both verifying credibility of state-aligned news and challenging it. If one treats TV viewers as sophisticated ideologues with coherent opinions, their ambivalent reactions can be seen as paradoxical. If one adopts a psychology-driven approach, this ambivalence will simply be understood as a result of the gulf between explicit ideas and intuitive cognitive strategies. These two dimensions – the mechanisms underlying making sense of news and the distinction between explicit ideas and intuitive strategies - should be considered in order to build a more detailed and plausible vision

of news processing in Russia.

In addition, this argument allows me to contribute to the understanding of the nature of news processing under other electoral authoritarian regimes with some reservations. Political engagement is a crucial factor which determines both news processing and authoritarian survival. Electoral authoritarian regimes are often characterized by constrained media freedom (Leeson, 2008), perceived electoral corruption (Kostadionva, 2009; Simpser, 2012), non-competitive politics (Croke et al., 2015; Frantz, 2018), and autocrats' deliberate demobilization strategy (Linz, 2000; McAllister & White, 2017; Robertson, 2011) which can render political engagement as a futile activity in the eyes of citizens. At the same time, political engagement crucially determines whether citizens can meaningfully engage with political information (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1995; Zaller, 1992). Although some studies indirectly touched upon the role of political engagement in news processing in authoritarian contexts (e.g., Meyen & Schwer, 2007; Zhang, 2012), the connection between news processing, political engagement, and authoritarian survival has largely been outside the scope of analysis. My findings allow me to clarify how political engagement can affect news processing and in turn, authoritarian survival. The findings demonstrate that without proper motivation for political learning and participation, citizens under an electoral authoritarian regime might not be able to form consistent opinions. The participants of this research accumulated dissatisfaction with many aspects of life in an authoritarian context. They are dissatisfied with the manipulative nature of media, poor living conditions, and the government's policies. However, they do not have enough motivation to learn about politics to integrate these ideas and impressions into a coherent whole. As a result, they do not challenge, rather than support, the fragile authoritarian equilibrium.

To what extent can these findings be generalized to other electoral authoritarian regimes? Not all electoral authoritarian regimes are born alike: the level mobilization, perception of electoral integrity, and competitiveness can vary across regimes. The electoral authoritarian regime in Ukraine is more competitive than the electoral authoritarian regime in Russia, and electoral authoritarian regime in Georgia is characterized by higher electoral integrity than electoral authoritarian regimes in Russia and Ukraine. Hence, these findings should be more applicable to electoral authoritarian regimes which are characterized by their less competitive nature, higher level of electoral corruption, restricted media freedom, the deliberate reliance on

demobilization as a strategy, and other factors making political engagement seem as futile.

7.3. Low-Information Rationality Under an Electoral Authoritarian Regime

In addition, this argument allows me to contribute to a better understanding of the functioning of low-information rationality in an authoritarian context. Scholars assume that in dealing with news and political information, TV viewers rely on a wide variety of heuristics provided by the environment (e.g., Popkin, 1994). The array of such heuristics is always mixed and includes both heuristics drawn from daily life, such as common sense and cultural stereotypes, and heuristics drawn from the political environment, such as opinions of trusted politicians and parties, authoritative experts, and reputation of media sources. It is not exactly clear how TV viewers would utilize the cues provided by the political environment where political system and ideological forces do little to represent meaningful variety of political preferences and interests, and media enjoy little trust.

Based on my findings, I have provided a nuanced analysis of the intuitive folk psychology of processing news and political information of the Russian TV viewer and demonstrated how TV viewers adjust low-information rationality to an authoritarian environment. I found that only a small group of political sophisticates who are supportive of Putin's regime directly rely on the ownership heuristic and their political preferences to interpret the news. For other participants, the balance between different types of heuristics is shifted towards common sense and cultural stereotypes. Most heuristics used by less politically active TV viewers are based on common sense and simple logical rules, such as "violence is difficult to fabricate," "professionally-looking journalists are likely to provide reliable information," "people with superior knowledge have better understanding of events," "if there are signs of persuasive intent, the information is not reliable." Some strategies of less politically active TV viewers are shaped by the historical and cultural experience of the post-Soviet society, such as "any politics is based on manipulation and opposes the interests of the people" and "if information is provided by the state, the state will bias the information in accordance with its interests." None of them rely on the structure of the contemporary Russian political information environment, such as party structure, reputation of particular

media, opinions of politicians or experts. Heuristics constitute the mind's "adaptive toolbox" (Gigerenzer & Todd, 2000, p. 30). They adjust to specific features of informational environments which proved to be useful to predict outcomes and make inferences. As TV viewers do not consider parties, politicians, and media organizations as sources of reliable and authoritative information for interpreting the matters of public concern, they recalibrate their cognitive toolkits and rely more on common sense, cultural and historical experience.

To what extent can these findings be generalized to other electoral authoritarian regimes? Distrust with political institutions caused by political corruption and electoral fraud is fairly common across authoritarian regimes (Kostadionva, 2009; Martinez i Coma & Trinh, 2016; Simpser, 2012; Stockemer et al., 2012). Similarly, news media in authoritarian contexts are often associated with profound distrust (e.g., Gehlbach & Sonin, 2014). The reliance on personal experience rather than credibility of media organizations or opinions of parties and politicians in authoritarian contexts can be corroborated by other studies by findings of other scholars (e.g., Pjesivac et al., 2016; Szostek, 2017; Truex, 2016). Hence, one can expect citizens to process information in similar way under other electoral authoritarian regimes.

7.4. Electoral Authoritarian Regime in the High-Choice Media Environment

Finally, this research allows me to contribute to a better understanding of how the development of new media technologies reshapes politics and society. The proliferation of media – or high-choice media environments – is not a deterministic phenomenon, which inevitably brings similar outcomes in any context. Rather, it is a process which crucially depends on particular political, economic, and institutional environments. My study traces the outcomes of this process under an electoral authoritarian regime. The research on the impact of high-choice media environments on political communication in democracies suggests that the earlier concerns associated with polarization brought about by the growing number of available media are exaggerated. While new media polarize the public by offering a wide variety of entertainment for those who prefer entertainment and a wide variety of political content for those who prefer political content, contemporary media environments are far from a set of completely homogeneous preference based "echo-chambers" and algorithm-

based personalized “filter bubbles.” If media and political systems themselves are relatively diverse, this diversity (even if it is a diversity of biased political information) will counteract individuals’ tendency to tailor their media diets in accordance with their political preferences and exclude information from the other side of the political spectrum, even if this tendency is assisted by algorithms.

However, this diversity is significantly reduced in Russia as the government can and do implement concerted pressure over many media sources at the same time. If there are actors who possess enough financial, political, and coercive resources to enforce relative homogeneity across many media sources, this strategy results in the orchestrated filter bubble effect as demonstrated by this study. This orchestrated filter bubble effect is different from the personalized filter bubble effect identified in the research on polarization in market-based systems (Personal, 2011). Instead of the preferences of citizens, it is based on the agenda of state-controlled television. When TV viewers find media content with identical political framing in both television news and a variety of online media, this similarity across sources is interpreted as a sign of credibility of television news. The government’s strategy, the aim of which is to provide similar accounts of events in television news and several online sources, plays on TV viewers’ intuitive understanding of credibility. This intuitive understanding of credibility dictates that information can be verified through comparisons of multiple sources (Meola, 2004; Metzger, 2007). The findings show that the multiplication of media sources which results from the advent of the high-choice media environment can have different effects on political communication depending on specific political and institutional settings.

In addition, these findings contribute to the understanding of “computational propaganda” in authoritarian contexts. My findings demonstrate the specific mechanisms through which “computational propaganda” is exercised in Russia and show that it can perform a variety of functions which are not reducible to direct persuasion. Some scholars argue that instead of spreading information and persuading citizens directly, Russian news aggregators filter out information which does not agree with the narratives of the Russian government (Daucé, 2017), while automated bots on social media promote specific news media and stories in the rankings of search engines (Stukal et al., 2017). My findings advance these ideas by showing that state-controlled television news, online news media, and news aggregators in Russia form a media ecology with a complicated division of labor: while

TV news broadcasts are responsible for spreading political narratives, news aggregators and state-controlled online news media are responsible for attracting additional attention and reinforcement of these narratives.

To what extent can these findings be generalized to other authoritarian regimes? The regime's capacity to shape the media sphere crucially depends on available resources (Egorov et al., 2009). While many electoral authoritarian regimes resort to blocking websites, creating repressive legislation and controlling Internet infrastructure, only resource-rich and technology-savvy autocrats such as Russia and China can afford more advanced techniques, such as comprehensive systems for censoring online content (King et al., 2013) and paid commentators and bots for shaping online public discussions (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010). Hence, these findings should be relevant for resource-rich autocrats who possess considerable resources and invest them in advanced techniques of control.

7.5. Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

The study identified many important aspects of news processing which are relevant for both the research on Russian media and the research on news processing, polarization, and high-choice media environments under electoral authoritarian regimes. However, as always, it raises as many questions as it answers. This study reveals several potential avenues for research. Some of these avenues are related to the shortcomings of the method used in this study. Others would allow scholars to explore the processes identified in this dissertation further.

Several potential avenues for research opened up by this study are related to the shortcomings of the method used in this study. For instance, the experimental design based on reaction time and perceived importance tasks (e.g., Nelson et al., 1997) could lend causal validity to the relationships between accessibility, applicability, political engagement, and the political regime which is an integral part of the first argument of the dissertation. After exposing citizens to news broadcasts and gauging their political sophistication, one could measure their reaction time to the concepts related to the broadcasts and perceived importance of the issues covered in the broadcasts. If political sophisticates demonstrate changes in perceived importance but no changes in reaction time, while political novices demonstrate changes in reaction time, it will mean that political sophistication determines whether subjects rely on

accessibility or applicability as mechanisms of news processing. Furthermore, as knowledge and sophistication are very domain-specific (Shank & Abelson, 1977), it is logical to assume that the same person can rely on the most accessible considerations to process a message containing unfamiliar information and a consistent schema to process a message containing familiar information. If one gauges the subjects' familiarity with the topics of the news broadcasts and finds that subjects rely on applicability while processing information about familiar topics and accessibility while processing information about unfamiliar topics, these findings would lend further validity to the causal relationships between accessibility, applicability, and political sophistication. Finally, one could test these hypotheses in a democratic and an authoritarian context. If subjects in democracies rely on applicability and schemas more than under authoritarian regimes, these findings would lend causal validity to the first argument of the dissertation posing that low political engagement under authoritarian regimes determines the reliance on accessibility as a mechanism for news processing.

Another interesting avenue for research emphasized in this study is the heuristics used to process political information in democracies and authoritarian contexts. The analysis of the role of heuristics in news processing is mostly limited to democracies. As a result, if competitive political systems have more credible media, they will mediate the processes analyzed. In a way, Russia constitutes an outlier or a "deviant" case (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Undermined political competition and media diversity can allow scholars to understand the role of heuristics in news processing better. While the present study gives some insights into how heuristics can function under an electoral authoritarian regime, a comparative study of low-information rationality in a democratic and an authoritarian context would generate a far more grounded and valid understanding of the role of political institutions in news processing. For instance, one could expose subjects in democratic and authoritarian contexts to the same sequence of news broadcasts and use verbal protocols (Riech, 2002) to explore the cognitive heuristics used to evaluate these broadcasts. If subjects in democratic contexts rely more on political heuristics provided by political and media institutions, while subjects in authoritarian contexts rely more on cultural stereotypes and daily life, this would lend additional validity to the second argument of the dissertation, posing that citizens under an electoral authoritarian regime are prone to relying on non-political sources of heuristics. A more complicated design could rely on dynamic process tracing (Lau &

Redlawsk, 2002) to explore the same phenomena. One could expose citizens in democratic and authoritarian contexts to the same sequence of news broadcasts, ask them to come up with opinions about these broadcasts, and provide them with the “information board” containing operationalized heuristics as additional information. Recoding what information subjects use, how long it is used, and the order in which it is used, one could lend additional causal validity to the second argument of this dissertation.

Another interesting avenue for research emphasized in this study is cross-media diets and their effects on news processing. While this study provides some hints about the mechanism underlying the orchestrated filter bubble effect and the conditions under which it can arise, these hints are far from being a comprehensive understanding. A simple survey-based study investigating the reliance on news aggregators and agreement with the agenda of the state-aligned television could lend causal validity to the idea of filter bubble effect identified in this study. A more complicated design could explore the relationships between real media consumption and perceptions of news credibility. For instance, in the analysis of fake news consumption, Guess and colleagues combined surveys with individual web-traffic analysis (Guess et al., 2018). Such a combination would be perfect for investigating the orchestrated filter bubble effect. By tracing and categorizing all sources of information used by subjects and correlating these data with their perception of credibility of news, one could provide more reliable data to prove or disprove the orchestrated filter bubble effect identified in this dissertation. In addition, this study shows that cross-media repertoires are complex structures which are shaped both by the information-seeking activities of participants and the types of engagement set by different types of media. More comprehensive understanding of the relationships between cross-media diets and political sophistication requires both these factors to be considered. A study based on individual web-traffic data and survey investigating participants’ political knowledge and interest in politics, perceptions of credibility and trust in news, and opinions about politics would allow these complex relationships to be traced between modes of cognitive engagement set by different media, political engagement of participants themselves, and the resulting effects on media and political information processing. Finally, one could test the hypothesis about the orchestrated filter bubble effect in democratic and authoritarian contexts. For instance, if one finds that the use of news aggregators in a democracy reinforces citizens’

political preferences, while the use of news aggregators under an electoral authoritarianism reinforces the agreement with the narratives of the state-aligned television, these findings would lend causal validity to the third argument of this dissertation, posing that a government's concerted pressure over many media sources at the same time can trigger consistency across heuristic sources and create an orchestrated filter bubble effect.

Possible preference falsification in an authoritarian context can further undermine the generalizability of the findings. Expressing dissenting views in an authoritarian context can distort research findings. Individuals can feel not safe enough to express ideas which contradict the official policy which is known as social desirability bias in social psychology (Krumpal, 2013) and preference falsification in political science (Kuran, 1997). Two objections can be made here. First, the amount of critical commentary regarding the media, the government, and Russia's involvement in the conflict voiced during focus groups was quite surprising in the context of the authoritarian regime and intense political confrontation. Almost every focus group discussion was ridden with criticism which makes preference falsification unlikely. Perhaps my self-presentation as a student working on doctoral research did not provoke many concerns. Alternatively, the moment when focus groups were conducted – 2016 and 2017 – coincides with the general fatigue resulting from the conflict as evidenced by many ideas expressed during focus group discussions. This fatigue could have made research participants more willing to express criticism. Second, while scholars show that preference falsification is a significant factor which distorts survey results in Russia (e.g., Kalinin, 2016), this study explored the mechanisms underlying news processing rather than the proportion of citizens who are critical of the regime. Even if some research participants did not express their genuine views or expressed the views which were thought to be “safer” in the authoritarian environment, this confounding factor was unlikely to influence *how* participants were expressing their views, that is, accessibility and applicability mechanisms. A more rigorous experimental design could lend further validity to the results. Recently, the list experiment or item counting technique (ICT) has become a widely used tool to counter preference falsification in authoritarian countries (e.g., Frye et al., 2017; Kalinin, 2016). Instead of asking citizens' opinions, researchers assign subjects to the lists of items which contain non-sensitive items with one extra sensitive item for the treatment group. Subjects are asked to name only the number of items

they agree with, and the true proportion of respondents supporting the item is calculated as the difference between control and treatment group. A study exposing citizens to news reports and measuring the results via ICT could overcome that shortcoming.

In addition, the choice of the Russia-Ukraine conflict as a case study can limit the generalizability of the findings. Proposed by Mueller (1973) in his early work on war and attitudes towards foreign policy, the “rally-around-the-flag” dictates that popular support of political leaders will increase during war or international crisis. This hypothesis enjoys considerable the support of scholars across countries (e.g., Baum, 2002; Sirotkina & Zavadskaya, 2020). However, my data do not demonstrate much “rallying-around-the-flag.” Quite the opposite, the initial support of Putin’s regime and Russia’s involvement in the conflict during focus group discussions got drowned in intensive criticisms of the regime. A plausible explanation for the absence of strong “rally-around-the-flag” effect is that the study was conducted in 2016 and 2017. The “rally-around-the-flag” effect is known to generate only a short-term increase in support of political leaders. To the contrary, by 2016 the coverage of war and international conflict had become routine for Russian TV viewers. Still, a study which investigates Russian TV viewers in times of less intense international confrontation would allow one to draw more valid generalization.

While the methods described above could strengthen the arguments of this dissertation rather than advance new ideas, this study also opens a number of avenues for new research. For instance, ideology and partisanship remain an interesting topic for research in authoritarian contexts. Starting from the landmark studies of the Columbia School (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), ideology and partisanship are considered to be the most important factors mediating news processing. Once a citizen’s ideology and favorite party are identified, scholars can predict not only this citizen’s favorite politicians and attitudes towards particular policies, but a wide array of other factors which influence news processing. Ideology and partisanship predict whether citizens will watch particular TV channels (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2011), how citizens perceive political bias in news (Vallone et al., 1985; Rahn, 1993), how they infer and reconstruct obscure or missing elements of news reports based on ideological schema (Hamil et al. 1985; Lodge & Hamil, 1986), and many other factors. However, ideology is not only a set of ideas. It is also a means of getting votes (Downs, 1957). Hence, ideologies and partisanship are closely tied to

party systems. Parties and party leaders are responsible for what Converse calls the “constraint”: the imposed consistency of ideology. If constraint is high, one attitude within a given ideology (e.g., negative attitude towards welfare spending) will predict another attitude within a given ideology (e.g., negative attitudes about gun control). Constraint dissipates once we reach a less partisan and engaged stratum of the population. With lower constraint, elements of ideology can contradict each other (Converse, 1964). Since competitive party systems under electoral authoritarian regimes are compromised, this institutional framework of ideology is absent in Russia. In Russia, parties do not really work as channels to represent meaningful variety of ideological differences. As a result, the constraint related to parliamentary parties cannot be used as a convenient way to analyze ideology and partisanship. As Sirotkina and Zavadskaya explain, in Russia, “the existing party system does little to represent actual ideological preferences” (Sirotkina & Zavadskaya, 2020, p. 10). The analysis of ideology and partisanship and their effects on news processing under an electoral authoritarian regime can be an extreme case or “an outlier”. By comparing the results in democracies and authoritarian contexts, one could generate more grounded and valid understanding of the role of ideology and partisanship in news processing in general.

Finally, the choice of theoretical framework itself partly limits the research findings. As with most studies in political communication, the approach which I adopted for this study rests on psychology which is put in the context of political science. Both cognitivism adopted by most psychologists today and psychology-driven explanation of media influence have been under fire from at least two camps: sociology and cultural studies. Ethnomethodology- and phenomenology-driven accounts of thinking and behavior question cognitivists’ theories of mind by pointing at social nature of cognition. As critics argue, cognitive processes cannot be detached from social interactions and particular everyday life contexts (e.g., Coulter, 1987). From this perspective, all theoretical apparatus of cognitive psychology– the assumptions about mind as information processing system, the role of memory, schemas, and heuristics in processing information – “turn out to be either metaphors for hitherto unexplicated phenomena or else just empty phrases. They do not literally describe anything physical or cultural” (Coulter, 1987, p. 69). In a similar way, the approaches to media reception in cultural studies question the key assumption of political communication by arguing that the meaning is produced collectively in

interactions between media texts and audience members (Hall, 1973; Hutchings & Rulyova, 2008).

Relying on the cognitivist framework, this study borrows many of the aforementioned fallacies. While the qualitative turn in political communication has contributed much to demonstrating the social nature of opinion (e.g., Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Popkin, 1994), political communication is still psychology-driven and assumes individuals and cognitive processes in their minds as a starting point of any social and political processes. In addition, despite the enormous diversity of approaches in the field, political communication still suffers from what Hall (1973) termed “the lingering behaviorism” of mass media research. It assumes that the meaning is located in the media message and then extracted, accepted, rejected, reinterpreted, or misunderstood. Since these assumptions are too fundamental and ontological, the associated shortcoming cannot be addressed in a satisfactory way without completely revamping the theoretical and methodological backbone of this study. However, theories are not worldviews which are right or wrong. They are lenses which allow scholars to see some aspects of reality while making them blind to other aspects and instruments which are used to answer specific questions. After all, “models are to be used, but not to be believed” (Theil, 1971, p. vi). The cognitivist framework is good enough for answering the questions raised in this study, such as the nature of news processing, the role of political engagement in news processing, and the effect of political regime on news processing, but can be inappropriate for answering other questions.

7.6. Post-Scriptum

While this study contributes to a number of academic discussions related to the intersection between media, politics, and psychology, it also constitutes a vantage point for a research-informed reflection on the current status of Russian media, politics, and citizenry. The conceptual tools developed in this study allow for critical re-evaluation of the role of the media in shaping public opinion in Russia. My findings show that Russian television definitely affects TV viewers’ opinions about politics. By borrowing the most accessible ideas to form opinions about politics, they rely on interpretations of events provided by TV news. However, this effect is short-lived. As they are not engaged in public affairs on a routine basis, they do not have enough

cognitive resources to fully assimilate ideas provided by state-owned TV. Similarly, the effects of the concerted pressure over different media sources implemented by the state should not be overestimated. The cross-validation of information across different sources and the resulting orchestrated filter bubble effect are very fragile. As this cross-validation is not backed up by more serious engagement with politics, this orchestrated filter bubble effect is unlikely to lead to the incorporation of a regime's narratives and can vanish as soon as the homogeneity of the information space is put into question by more political and media diversity. If this model applies equally to other Russian TV viewers, the power of television, which is an important pillar of Putin's regime, is not as formidable as it seems. If participants have as many critical opinions as they voiced during the focus groups, it is likely that, coupled with external shocks—such as a political crisis or the loss of state control over the media—the seemingly formidable popular support of the regime may quickly fade. Most probably, the enormously high ratings of presidential approval in Russia may also result from accessibility effects rather than ideological convictions. Pollsters often ask general political questions—such as questions about the country's leaders and international politics—which my research suggests are likely to trigger accessibility effects. Since the Russian media have been paying disproportionate attention to international politics for years, what pollsters receive in response to questions about president Putin or Crimea might be the content of recent news rather than participants' opinions.

In addition, this study presents both a grim assessment of Russian TV viewers and a testimony to the cognitive flexibility and adaptability of citizens, which allows me to be cautiously optimistic about the prospects and critical abilities of the Russian public. Most participants in this study adapted to an authoritarian context as best as they could. To make sense of news, they draw on the most accessible ideas and memories and cannot form consistent opinions about politics. They rely on time-tested cognitive strategies, such as common sense and cultural stereotypes, which cannot account for the complexity of the political environment. They attempt to consume information from different sources, such as TV news, news aggregators, online news media, which, alas, lack substantive diversity. However, in doing so, they demonstrate perfectly rational, although not intentional, behavior which is designed to operate efficiently within an environment. TV viewers choose a rational strategy to deploy mental resources in a way that allows them to have some understanding of the matters of public concern because they are still interested in following public affairs and know

that politics concerns them. However, they invest only a minimally efficient fraction of their time and effort in acquiring political knowledge because they know that the issues discussed on TV are beyond their reach. Rather than simply being politically passive or unsophisticated, they actively choose strategies of thought and behavior which better correspond to an authoritarian environment. If the environment changes providing them with the perception that their individual political engagement can have effect on the course of political life and more reliable cognitive tools to make sense of political information, according to this view, they would recalibrate their strategies and engage with politics in more substantive ways. Under more favorable conditions, they can become one of the cornerstones of democracy - the critical and engaged public.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: An Example of a News Story

The Maidan Protests in Kiev (4 minutes 38 seconds, aired on November 30, 2013)

News Anchor: Now news from Kiev. The supporters of Eurointegration who were pushed out of the Maidan square early this morning are gathering at another square—Mikhaylovksya—close to the territory of the monastery where 100-200 participants of the dispersed demonstration are sheltered. The officials are making claims related to the use of force by police. According to the official data, 35 people were injured and 35 people were detained. Our correspondent Vitaliy Kadchenko will provide more details.

Correspondent: The riots on Euromaidan started at 4 p.m. When the truck supposed to install the New Year Tree entered the square, police demanded that protesters leave. All protest actions in the city center were officially banned two weeks ago, but the ban has not worked. People in masks started to spread unknown gas, there were several noises sounding like gunshots. People started to throw rocks, bottles, and burning logs at riot police. Nobody was distinguishing between friends and foes. People climbing the roof of the trade center were literally pulled from it. People used batons, even their legs to hit. About 40 people were injured including two Polish citizens who found themselves at the protest action against Ukraine's officials to postpone Eurointegration as well. Seven people with various injuries were brought to the hospital. Police officials say that 12 officers were injured as well. Criminal investigations were initiated under the articles "Resistance to police officers" and "Hooliganism." After detention, police officers let them go. About 200 participants were sheltered by the Mikhaylovkiy monastery of Kyiv Patriarchate, so called "heretic church," from detention. People started to gather a demonstration in front of the monastery—they were given hot tea and warm clothes. They were asked not to use swear words and not to smoke inside the monastery.

Polish citizens: What makes us Europeans are not agreements and associations signed by one person. My heart, not my hand and head, hurts when I look at what is happening.

Correspondent: Despite it being the weekend, the ambassadors of the Netherlands and Finland and the chair of the representative office of the European Union visited the protesters. They refused to speak from the stage remembering the agitation of the chief of the Lithuanian Seim for the Eurointegration before the summit in Vilnius. That is how they explained their reasons for being at the square.

Arja Makkonen, Ambassador of Finland: We have come here because we want to know what has happened—to see the situation with our own eyes.

Kess Klompenhouwer, Ambassador of Netherlands: We decisively condemn violence against protesters.

Correspondent: The Prime Minister of Ukraine, Nikolay Azarov, demanded that those who responsible for the violent dispersal of the demonstration be found. He even posted it on his Facebook page. The chair of the Cabinet of Ministers assured citizens that the ruling party is not interested in this development of the situation and asks Ukrainians not to succumb to provocations.

Azarov Facebook page: I am infuriated and concerned by the events that happened on the Maidan square last night. The data I have does not allow one to make definite conclusions: who is responsible for this provocation. That is why an investigative group was created including officials from the Prosecutor's Office. It will give a qualified legal assessment of all parties involved in the conflict... This group has a clear task: to carry out an investigation in a very limited time and give society a clear answer: who should receive a punishment, what punishment, and for what.

Correspondent: The Minister of the Interior promised to find and punish culprits. The leaders of the oppositional parties claimed that they are starting to prepare nationwide strikes to demand the resignation of the government and early election of the Rada [Ukrainian parliament]. Arseniy Yatsenyuk called the assault of Euromaidan by police “a special operation of the ruling party.”

Arseniy Yatsenyuk: We—three opposition parties—have made a decision about the formation of the Headquarters of the national resistance. We are starting to prepare a nationwide strike. We expect a reaction from our Western partners. Not only words but actions.

Correspondent: Tomorrow the rally will move to a new place. The announced “Narodnoye veche” will take place in Shevchenko park which is also in the city center. The opposition announced the mobilization of supporters across the country. The deputies of three factions —“Batkivshchyna,” “Udar,” and “Svoboda”—will try to enforce compliance with their demands in the Verkhovna Rada [Ukrainian parliament] next week. We all know how it happens. In the meantime, a huge rally in support of President Yanukovich’s decision not to sign the agreement with the EU took place in Kharkiv on the biggest Square of Freedom in Europe. The directors of big businesses gave speeches and reiterated that the main market for Ukraine is Russia and the CIS countries. Deteriorating relationships with neighbors can lead to economic collapse. Vitaliy Kadchenko, Evgeniy Krivonosov, Sergey Titenko and Grigoriy Yemelyanov, Channel One, Kiev.

Visuals: Map of Ukraine; clashes between police and protesters; throwing rocks and bottles; building barricades; rally in front of the monastery; interview with injured Polish citizens; interview with the Ambassadors of Finland and the Netherlands; Facebook page of Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk speaking at the press conference of the opposition; peaceful pro-Russian meeting in Kharkiv supporting President Yanukovichs’ decision not to sign the EU-Ukraine agreement.

Appendix B. Focus Group Scenario

- *First Impressions.* Please describe your first impressions about the news report. What associations come to your mind? Which elements in the video attracted your attention?
- *Emotions.* What emotions does this news report provoke? Did you have situations when emotions or mood made you avoid watching TV or watch TV more?
- *Credibility.* Do you think that this news report is credible? Or is it questionable? Why? (If no particular reasons are given, the moderator gives a set of possible opinions: the professionalism of journalists, references to experts, state ownership of the channel, compelling images et cetera).
- *Negative effects.* Do you watch news about Ukraine? Can you say that you started watching news more after the beginning of the conflict? Less? Why?
- *Practices of watching.* Do you watch news alone or with friends/family? Do you discuss the news with them? Do you have arguments or disagreements? Do you tend to agree with them, or do you rather stick to your own opinion? Do you try to convince others? Whose opinions are important for you in the evaluation news and politics?
- *Internet usage.* Do you read or watch news online? What online sources do you use: blogs, news websites, news aggregators, social networks, YouTube? Is there any difference between the same news on TV and online? How do you determine what is more credible if and when the stories on TV and online contradict?

Appendix C. Socio-Demographic Characteristics and News Consumption

N: 56 participants

Sex: Women, 53%; men, 47%.

Age: 18-24, 20%; 25–34, 27%; 35-50, 37%; 51-64, 16%;

Education: Higher education, 66%; secondary education, 16%; college students, 16%;

Income: the question about income was asked but reliable insights can hardly be extracted from the data. Many Russian citizens have multiple jobs and sources of income. As this income is often not a subject to taxation, many Russians would not wish it to be recorded.

TV news consumption: daily, 53%; several times a week, 27%; several times a month, 13%; less often than several times a month, 7%.

Internet usage: daily, 91%; several times a week, 6%; do not use at all, 4%;

Name	Age	Education	Employment
Tatiana	33	college	travel agent
Sofia	46	college	social worker
Fedor	59	college	pensioner
Sonya	41	college	entrepreneur
Mikhail	32	high school	auto mechanic
Maria	27	college	engineer
Alexander	35	college	market research analyst
Galina	56	high school	pensioner
Nina	26	high school	sales agent

Diana	45	college	physician
Boris	23	college	ballet dancer
Leonid	19	college	college student
Vladimir	46	high school	pensioner (disability)
Yekaterina	52	college	insurance agent
Victor	35	college	teacher
Ivan	45	college	taxi driver
Roman	44	college	programmer
Ksenia	34	college	economist
Kristina	44	high school	kindergarten teacher
Larisa	35	college	restaurant administrator
Svetlana	27	college	manager
Anton	38	high school	security officer
Irina	29	college	white collar employee
Nikolay	52	college	real estate agent
Alexandra	49	high school	pensioner (disability)
Vasily	53	college	engineer
Andrey	26	high school	cashier
Kirill	36	college	retired military officer
Natalia	39	college	housewife
Yulia	19	college	college student
Elena	19	college	college student
Sergey	20	college	college student
Petr	20	college	college student
Alina	35	high school	housewife

Yegor	20	college	college student
Alexey	19	college	college student
Nikita	18	college	college student
Oleg	26	college	HR officer
Ilya	37	high school	waiter
Artem	40	college	sales manager
Anna	33	college	IT consultant
Anastasia	33	college	sales agent
Kristina	44	high school	cashier
Veronica	58	college	pensioner
Oksana	50	high school	unemployed
Timofey	44	college	doctor
Yana	57	high school	pensioner
Yan	52	college	real estate agent
Yuriy	45	high school	factory worker
Alisa	22	college	college student
Eduard	19	high school	unemployed
Angelika	45	high school	factory worker
Asya	28	college	school teacher
Valentina	61	high school	pensioner
Varvara	39	college	cashier

Appendix D. Political knowledge

Domestic politics: well-aware, 7%; aware, 20%; poorly Aware, 58%; not aware, 15%;

International politics: well-aware, 43%; aware, 38%; poorly aware, 13%; not aware, 6%;

Current political events: aware, 20%; not aware, 80%;

The discrepancy between the knowledge of domestic politics and international politics is most probably a result of Russian TV's excessive focus on international politics. Since this is not a quantitative study, the questions were designed to get additional contextual information about political engagement rather than measuring political knowledge. Hence, the questions are few. Questions focused on several topics: domestic politics, international politics, and current events. As many scholars point out, the best way to measure political knowledge is to ask neutral factual questions about politics. Hence, the questions included:

- *Domestic politics*: 1) Who is the current speaker of the Russian State Duma? 2) What elections took place in Russia in 2016?
- *International politics*: 1) Which countries are the members of the NATO? 2) Is the U.K. a member of the European Union? 3) Which country accepted the highest number of Syrian refugees?
- *Current political events*: 1) Where was the Admiral Kuznetsov carrier group going to in 2016? 2) How many aircraft carriers does Russia have?