



Glamorous politics or political glamour? Content analysis of political coverage in Russian glossy magazines



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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes political and social themes of Russia's glossy magazines which represent the few remaining public spaces for surviving freedom of speech and expression in that post-communist country. As authoritarian nature of Russian political system deepens, the democratic openings often appear in unexpected places. Content analysis of two glamour monthlies, one (*GQ-Russian Edition*) intended for male audience, another (*Cosmopolitan-Russia*) – for female readership, shows consistently oppositional (anti-Putin) thrust of both publications, but also persistent political gender stereotypes. Analysis of these publications, intended for Russia's nascent urban class – traditionally a social strata most associated with democratic impulses – provides an important explanation behind recent democratic protest activities in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

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As the space for the freedom of speech has contracted in Putin's Russia, new, somewhat unexpected, venues have begun to fill the vacuum. Not unlike the effect that the 2010 *Rolling Stone* interview with general McCrystal had on US public discourse about the war in Afghanistan, the political forays of Russian glamour magazines might have long-ranging (and, in the Russian case, decidedly understudied) impact on the formation of public attitudes among Russia's urban upper and middle classes, as well as young (especially female) people. These segments of the population are not only the main readers of such publications, but also represent strong democratic potential in the context of sovereign democracy, as Russia's current political system is euphemistically referred to. Barrington Moore (1966, p. 418) famously remarked “no bourgeois, no democracy,” suggesting that the presence of the middle class is crucial for the emergence and, more importantly, consolidation of democracy. The study of the political content of publications intended for the potentially pro-democratic strata of Russian public opinion is important in its own right, however it does pose the question whether the political journalism that flourishes on the pages of the glossy magazines trivializes political problems, making them fashionable without producing meaningful democratic socialization effect? The most recent political events in Russia suggest that the readers (and authors) of the glossy magazines are indeed politically active and clamor strongly for democratic reforms, a fact that reinforces the importance of understanding political messages contained in these publications. In this article, I analyze the most important political and social themes of the two prominent glossies with political coverage – *GQ* and *Cosmopolitan-Russia*; and then compare their coverage, looking for gender differences in patterns of political socialization that the readers of male, and female oriented journals encounter. The findings of this analysis demonstrate both the strong democratic reformist potential of glamour publications and the persistent reinforcement of traditional gender roles in Russian politics. This tension between decidedly modern and Western ideals and more traditional social norms and attitudes, out of line with the Western standards, renders the question about the political and social impact of the Russian glossies particularly intriguing.

1. Political context: sovereign democracy in Russia

During the past twelve years, Russia experienced several departures from the Yeltsin period (1992–2000). First, was the growth of the oligarchic capitalism in which the role of the big business relative to other political actors, including small business, has increased through more successful, behind the scene lobbying. Secondly, federalism, cultivated under Yeltsin, albeit not in the most perfect form, has been effectively abandoned. Governors are appointed by the president and they, in turn, appoint their regions' representatives in the upper chamber of the Parliament, the Federation Council. There is more vertical centralization via 9 Federal Districts, soon to become 10. On the other hand, there has also been consistent economic growth, rising living standards, a growing middle class, and a shrinking number of people living below poverty line (Treisman, 2002). By all accounts, sovereign democracy has distinctly authoritarian flavor in which economic stability and even certain prosperity, enabling middle class and its rising consumption level, including ability to buy and read luxury glamour publications, coexist with serious democratic restrictions on the freedoms of the media. As this discussion demonstrates, the middle, and I assume pro-democracy, class is growing and the content of the publications that it reads is important if we want to understand the prospects of future democratization in Russia.

2. Political socialization effects of entertainment media: current state of research

Magazines and newspapers are particularly good sources of political information as they provide readers with in-depth and continuous flow of information that expands the initial political knowledge base, and require more active involvement by the readers. (Wattenberg, 2008). In short, reading political coverage in newspapers and magazines is indispensable for political engagement and ultimately for democratic participation, including voting. In the case of Russian sovereign democracy, this function of political communication might even be relegated to glamour magazines. The reasons why reading political news in the less traditional media outlets, including glossy magazines, might be connected to democratic political participation, among which are: 1) replacement of traditional sources of political information in the era of declining broadcast TV viewership and, in the case of Russia, increasing estatization of traditional broadcast media and state control of political messages and 2) glamour publications' emphasis on diverse pool of opinion leaders, both in political and social sense, who, in turn, provide readers with various political "cues and instructions for interpreting political information, and understanding candidates and the political system" (Reichert and Mueller, 2003, p. 516), including the views of democratic opposition leaders (Ansolabehere et al., 1993; Abrahamson, 1996; Newman et al., 1992).

The copious literature on political socialization demonstrates that the media, especially print media, do in fact influence political attitudes and political behavior. Among the media socializing effects on political attitudes and actual behavior are providing information on the content of politics (issues, events, participants). But the media influences readers and viewers on an even deeper level, by shaping elements of pro-social behavior and social expectations – importance of common good, including voting, helping others, empathy for injustice or pain inflicted on others (Hyman, 1974). Garramone and Atlin (1986), as well as Strate et al. (1994) found that the print media have especially strong impact on the fundamental political knowledge and, not surprisingly, result in greater rate of political participation. The latter demonstrates itself by improved civic competence, more informed judgment, and stronger motivation to participate, especially in non-voting political activities, including campaigning, protests, and contacting elected officials.

Even more relevant to the subject of this analysis is the literature on the political socialization effects of the entertainment media. Confined mostly to the discussion of late-night TV comedies, this strand of scholarship suggests that readers and viewers of lighter media fare start paying more attention to political campaigns on national networks and cable news as well as national newspapers (Baum, 2005; Feldman and Young, 2008; Kim and Vishak, 2008). Yet, "compared to news media, entertainment media are less effective in acquiring factual information, particularly issue and procedure knowledge" (Kim and Vishak, 2008, 338). These findings are not surprising, given the clout of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, but what about other TV shows and publications, not explicitly intended to provide consistent political coverage, like glamour magazines or comedy shows, especially in the Russian context, which, as the section below will describe, is characterized by heavy censorship of traditional news shows and quasi-political programs as well as print media's political coverage. Through jokes, coverage of candidates and events, however superficial, commentary, and concentrating on the side of candidates and political figures, entertainment/glamour publications can still influence political debates and readers'/viewers' political views and actions.

The comparative investigations of the glamour magazines are usually limited to the discussions of the images of beauty, meanings of sexuality, or the role of women in a society and rarely venture into the realm of political frames embedded in the news stories and advertisements that the glossy tabloids often contain (Lysonski, 1985; Gough-Yates, 2003; Chang, 2004; Frith et al., 2005; Skalli, 2006; Frith and Feng, 2009; Karan and Feng, 2010). Existing studies of the political messages published in the glamour magazines and discernible gender differences (Meyerowitz, 1993; Strate et al., 1994; Moskowitz, 1996; Reichert and Mueller, 2003) have been largely confined to the US case. Examination of glamour magazines' general and gendered political content in the US notwithstanding, there is little research on these relationships in Russia. The study of the uncensored print outlets with fairly large circulation numbers, like *Cosmopolitan-Russia* or *GQ-Russia*, which numbers rival most popular daily semi-tabloids, such as *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, is thus a useful starting point. So far, however, researchers have concentrated on the media climate and information policies in Russia in the content of sovereign democracy and notable discrepancies between constitutional rights of access to information and inadmissibility of censorship and actual

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