



## Center for Journalists in Extreme Situations

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### **Second report on media coverage of the 2 March presidential election** (2 – 25 February 2008)

Moscow, 28 February - CJES, the informational and analytical center of the Russian Union of Journalists, has been systematically monitoring the media coverage of the 2 March presidential election. CJES seeks to evaluate the mass media's performance in providing objective and balanced coverage of the contestants and their platforms so the citizens of Russia can make well-informed choices at the ballot box. The project's findings are determined through a well-defined and rigorous methodology which was already implemented by CJES during its previous media monitoring projects, most recently during the State Duma elections. The project's results are not intended to support any one candidate, but the integrity of the media environment as a whole during the campaign season.

Since 10 January, the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations has monitored five TV stations. The media unit analyzed the prime time news programs assessing and producing findings on the time allocated to all candidates running in the 2 March presidential elections, as well as the time allocation given to the President Putin. The tone of the coverage was also evaluated. Quantitative analysis measures the total amount of time devoted to election contestants and the President on news programs. Qualitative analysis evaluates the tone in which the monitored subjects have been portrayed – positive, neutral or negative. The enclosed charts show the results of the monitoring from 2 – 25 February.

This is the second report released prior to the 2 March presidential covering the official campaign period one month prior to election.<sup>1</sup> While the field of four candidates offered voters a choice, this election campaign was far from competitive given the lack of a vibrant political discourse and meaningful pluralism. Mr. Putin's chosen successor, Dmitry Medvedev, refrained in most respects from conventional campaign discourse, including his decision not to participate in televised debates between candidates. The democratic deficit thus created in the campaign environment by other candidates' lack of opportunity to directly address questions and comments to the incumbent First Deputy

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<sup>1</sup> To date, monitoring has taken place over two periods, 10 January – 1 February (the first monitoring period) and 2 – 25 February (the second monitoring period).

Prime Minister on his performance in office was compounded by the general absence of critical mass media posing such questions in its reporting. Moreover, the only potentially serious opponent to his candidacy was not registered by the Central Election Commission and thus Mr. Medvedev faced a field of opponents who commanded little apparent public support.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **State broadcasters failed comprehensively to meet their legal obligation to create equal conditions for all candidates by demonstrating clear bias in favour of Dmitry Medvedev, both in tone and amount of devoted coverage.**
- **The trend identified during the first monitoring period with Mr. Medvedev receiving more coverage than President Putin did not continue in the second monitoring period - the latter received the bulk of the coverage on all monitored TV channels.**
- **Private broadcaster NTV showed a similar pattern of political favouritism to that of State broadcasters whereas Ren TV offered a more balanced coverage of the candidates and President Putin.**

### *State-funded broadcasters*

Contrary to their public mandate and similarly as during previous elections, the State-controlled broadcasters once again comprehensively failed to meet their legal obligation to provide equal and fair treatment of the candidates and in their news programs displayed clear favouritism towards Dmitry Medvedev.<sup>2</sup> According to the election law, State-controlled broadcasters are obliged to allocate free airtime and organize televised debates between candidates during the peak time hours – however, some of the debates and free time spots were broadcast outside of the prime time.<sup>3</sup> The outgoing President Putin, who openly endorsed Mr. Medvedev`s candidacy, continued to receive substantial amount of coverage. In fact, the trend identified during the first monitoring period with Mr. Medvedev receiving more coverage than President Putin did not continue in the second monitoring period since the latter received the bulk of the coverage on all monitored TV channels.

In the three weeks of the monitoring, the state-controlled *First Channel* provided 60 per cent of its related prime time news coverage to the activities of President Putin. 87 percent of this coverage was assessed to be positive and 13 percent to be neutral in tone.

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<sup>2</sup> Gennadiy Ziuganov complained about unequal coverage by First Channel and TV Rossia to Central Election Commission and Moscow City Courts. The complaints were turned down as groundless by both the CEC and also the courts, with a judge reasoning his decision by stating that the Russian election legislation “does not clearly stipulate what is meant under equitable treatment of the candidates.”

<sup>3</sup> Article 54.2 stipulates that free air time shall be provided within broadcasting periods viewed or listened to by the greatest number of persons, as determined by the given TV and radio broadcasting organization.

As for the coverage of candidates, the most covered one was Dmitry Medvedev who received some 32 per cent of the coverage, which was also exclusively positive or neutral in tone. The other three candidates combined received a total of some 8 percent of the coverage, which was mainly neutral in tone.

Another state-controlled TV channel, *Rossia Channel*, adopted a similar approach and devoted altogether almost 60 per cent of its political and election prime time news coverage to the outgoing President Putin. This coverage was overwhelmingly positive and neutral in tone. As for the coverage of the candidates, Dmitry Medvedev obtained some 26 per cent of the coverage, which was also positive and neutral in tone. Gennadiy Ziuganov and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy received respectively almost 7 per cent of the coverage, which was mainly neutral in tone.

Similarly as the other two State-controlled broadcasters, also *TV Centre* gave the bulk of its coverage to Mr. Putin and Mr. Medvedev who received respectively 58 and 35 per cent of the political and election prime time news coverage. As for the tone of the coverage, however, it was more neutral than on the other two State-controlled channels. The next most covered candidate after Dmitry Medvedev was Gennadiy Ziuganov with only some 4 per cent of the coverage, which was neutral and positive in tone.

### ***Nationwide private broadcasters***

In the three weeks of monitoring, the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations found significant differences between the monitored private broadcasters' portrayal of the candidates and other monitored subjects. While *NTV*<sup>4</sup> generally adopted a similar approach to that of the state-controlled broadcasters, *Ren TV* provided a more balanced coverage of the candidates and President Putin.

*NTV* allocated the bulk of its prime time news coverage to Mr. Putin (54 per cent) which was mainly neutral and positive in tone. From among the monitored broadcasters, *NTV* allocated the biggest portion of its political and election-related coverage to the incumbent First Deputy Prime Minister Medvedev - 43 per cent. This coverage was mainly neutral in tone. By contrast, the other three candidates combined received a total of only 2,5 per cent of the coverage, which was mainly neutral in tone.

In comparison with the other four monitored TV channels, the second monitored private TV channel, *Ren TV*<sup>5</sup>, provided its viewers with a different picture of the pre-election campaign. While the channel devoted the bulk of its related prime time news coverage to Mr. Putin (31 per cent), it was much less than the other four monitored channels. 10 per cent of this coverage positive and 2 per cent negative in tone. As for the coverage of the candidates, Dmitry Medvedev (21 per cent), Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (22 per cent) and Gennadiy Ziuganov (20,5 per cent) received roughly equal proportions of the coverage.

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<sup>4</sup> The State company Gazprom is *NTV*'s majority stakeholder.

<sup>5</sup> 70 percent owned by the pro-government Severstal and Surgutneftegaz companies and 30 per cent by the RTL Group.

As for the tone of their coverage, it was mainly neutral with only Mr. Zhirinovskiy receiving some critical coverage.

### ***Conclusion***

Similarly as during the recent State Duma elections, the media coverage of the 2 March presidential election was one of the most important shortcomings of the process. This is a result of a strict control by the government over all national television and radio channels, as well as the majority of the influential broadcasters in the regions.

The CJES monitoring findings indicate that majority of the monitored media frequently neglected to offer Russian citizens opposing views on particular stories. It is also apparent that several disturbing trends in the way the Russian mainstream media covers political parties, the incumbent President and the government (unveiled by the CJES during the 2006 monitoring project period) continued during both the State Duma and presidential elections. These trends include the fact that the monitored media neglected to offer opposition any significant airtime and opportunities to challenge the political opinions of the current establishment. It is clear that the media's biased coverage of the election demonstrated that Russia lacks a strong and independent electronic media able to provide objective and balanced information to the electorate to make a well-informed choice at the ballot box.