

## Russian 2011-12 Elections and Digital Media

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AMERICA'S GAZE:  
OLD AND NEW MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE 2012 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS  
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How does one write about a non-event or—more importantly—why cover a non-event in the first place? Clearly, U.S. media coverage of the Russian presidential election of 2012 presents us with a case study. I do not mean to suggest that the election itself was a non-event, as it will undoubtedly have far reaching consequences for the Russian people, as well as energy security, geopolitics and international relations around the globe. What I do mean to imply is that the Russian presidential election on 4 March 2012 proved to be a non-story in the United States. There are a number of reasons, both domestic and international, which explain the lack of attention paid to either the campaign or the election itself. Perhaps the most relevant reason that the presidential elections were given short-shrift relates to the fact that the outcome was a foregone conclusion. Most American news viewers familiar with Russia still consider Vladimir Putin to be the leader of the Russian Federation, regardless of his 'official' title. Consequently, Putin's return to the position of head of state (as opposed to head of government) is of little consequence. Despite its ups and downs, the U.S.-Russian relationship has proved remarkably stable over the past decade, weathering the 2008 South Ossetian War, disputes over basing rights in Central Asia and numerous other contentious issues. In a recent Gallup poll, less than two percent of Americans ranked Russia as their country's 'greatest enemy' (Iran won that dubious honor). In fact, Russia shared the sixth place with U.S. ally Pakistan, and was perceived only slightly worse than Japan and Saudi Arabia, both stalwarts in America's global politico-economic network. Interestingly, the same percentage of Americans ranked the United States as its *own* greatest enemy. Given such a state of affairs, Russia does not figure greatly in the day-to-day of American security concerns. On the domestic front, the Russian election happened to occur during a particularly fractious period in U.S. politics involving bitter debates between the contenders for the Republican Party's presidential nomination which tended to absorb the lion's share of the media coverage.

That being stated, there are a few interesting avenues of inquiry to consider. I begin with a cursory treatment of traditional media coverage of the lead-up to the vote and election day coverage, followed by a somewhat deeper analysis of new media issues and the election.

### Predictable and Prosaic: Traditional Media Reporting on the Return of Putin

Traditional media coverage of the 2012 presidential election in Russia did not deviate greatly from established norms. U.S. nightly news reports and print journalism tended to employ the tried-and-true framing mechanisms of corruption, authoritarianism and the ‘cult of the leader.’ Having focused fairly intensively on the grassroots protests against the outcome of the December 2011 parliamentary elections, mainstream media outlets from NBC to the *New York Times* treated the coming presidential elections as a *fait accompli*, opting instead to highlight certain issues that fit with such frames. Just days before the election, the *New York Times* ran a front-page expose on Putin’s friends and relatives who have become fabulously wealthy entitled ‘Midas Touch in St. Petersburg: Friends of Putin Glow Brightly’ (Kramer and Herszenhorn 2012). Largely unsubstantiated and based on rumor and innuendo, the article did little more than reinforce notions that Putin’s dominance over the country is simply a mechanism for ‘crony capitalism.’ Televised and print coverage of the ‘suspicious timing’ of the reports of a thwarted plot to assassinate the prime minister (ostensibly planned by Chechen militant Doku Umarov) engaged the authoritarian frame by subtly (and not-so-subtly) suggesting that the story was simply a ploy to drum up last minute votes.

**Image 1.** Screenshot of a scuba-diving Putin from ABC World News’ broadcast of the results of the election.

The screenshot shows the ABC News website interface. At the top, there is a search bar and navigation links for various news categories. A prominent red banner at the top reads "BREAKING NEWS | North Korean Rocket Launch Fails, US Officials Confirm". Below this, a video player displays a scuba-diving scene with the text "Putin Wins Presidential Election" and a timestamp of "10 8 2011 16:07:47". To the right of the video player, there is a section titled "A TIP FROM A FORMER SMOKER" with a sub-headline "AFTER A STROKE FROM SMOKING, GET USED TO LOSING YOUR INDEPENDENCE." and a "MEET SUZY" button. Below the video player, there are "RELATED LINKS" including "Russian Election: Putin Seeks Return to Kremlin" and "WATCH FULL BROADCASTS". At the bottom right, there are "Most Popular News Videos" featuring "Ann Romney Responds to Personal Attack on Twitter" and "Ridiculously Photogenic! Guy Live on 'GMA'".

Source: <http://abcnews.go.com/> (accessed 12 April 2012).

Televised coverage of Putin's victory was a rather brief affair. *NBC Nightly News*, the nation's leading network news broadcast, made no mention of the presidential election until 14 minutes into the half-hour broadcast, characterizing the outcome as "Back to the Future." The 2 minute-long segment talked up the protests before shifting to reporting on Putin's teary-eyed response to his victory. On the evening of the election, *ABC World News* introduced Putin's win by stating that, in Russia, he is 'well-known for wrestling wild animals,' and as such has 'wrestled his way back into the presidency' (ABC 2012). The subsequent videos showed Putin in judo mode, horseback-riding and scuba diving, while the voice-over chatted about the president-elect's predilection for taking his shirt off. The segment ended with a brief reference to Twitter and its use by activists to share information about irregularities such as ballot box-stuffing. The strangest reporting of all came from *CBS Evening News* which dispensed with any meaningful analysis of the election in favor of discussing (and showing) St. Petersburg-Moscow hockey rivalries, thus injecting a bit of infotainment into the story (and supplying a narrative easily understood by sports-obsessed American television viewers). The comparative absence of genuine reporting on the election was boldly underscored by a comparison with *World News America*, BBC's half-hour news program intended for an American viewing audience and broadcast on PBS. Reflecting the network's concern for international affairs, the in-depth coverage and elevated discussion of the political situation in Russia provided a stark contrast to anything appearing on 'American' news programs, i.e., produced in the corporatist style associated with more profit-driven news bureaus as CBS, ABC, and NBC. Only the *Washington Post*, a newspaper that serves the U.S. political elite, sought to provide coverage of the election *qua* an election, discussing the political party system, the Communists' base of support, problems for Putin as he returns from a four year absence in the office, etc.

### **Mediating Celebrity, Digital Propaganda and the Prokhorov Effect**

One arena where American traditional media and new media coverage of the Russian elections overlapped was their focus on Mikhail Prokhorov, the billionaire metals magnate and owner of the New Jersey Nets. Prokhorov declared his candidacy in December 2011, ostensibly hoping to capitalize on the surging 'anyone but Putin' sentiment among Russia's disaffected middle-class. However, from the start, it was clear that Prokhorov was a Potemkin candidate, carefully placed to draw away support from genuine contenders for the top spot, provide a 'liberal' alternative to Putin and validate the 'democratic credentials' of the presidential race (which, after the 4 December 2011 legislative elections, would naturally be scrutinized by the outside world). Very quickly, Prokhorov's candidacy turned into a side-show, as his playboy image eschewed any meaningful discussion of politics or policy. As a pre-made celebrity, Prokhorov brought a certain level of pizzazz to an otherwise torpid affair. More importantly for American media outlets, he brought the American angle that would permit coverage of the Russian elections as something other than the dreaded 'foreign affairs' story. As the owner of a well-known sports franchise, Prokhorov—at a minimum—was something to talk about. By way of example, I was asked by *Newsday*, a widely read daily newspaper in the New York/Long Island metropolitan area, to write an opinion piece on Prokhorov's candidacy entitled 'Russia's Potemkin Candidate' (Saunders 2012). Without his

'local' connection, *Newsday* could have cared less about the vagaries of the Russian election. Knowing the value of his celebrity appeal, Prokhorov readily played the role of mediated persona as the election drew nearer.

Perhaps most famously, Prokhorov performed a rap directed at his co-owner of the Nets, Jay-Z, marketing himself as the most gangsta choice to replace Dmitry Medvedev. The news website, content aggregator, blog site and Internet community *Huffington Post* ([huffingtonpost.com](http://huffingtonpost.com)) picked up a video of the rap and highlighted the silliness of the overall campaign in its accompanying essay. With over one million unique comments per month, the site is comparable in terms of readers to the U.S.'s largest newspaper circulations so its pop culture-based treatment of the election proved to be a substantial component of the overall media coverage of the elections.

**Image 2.** Screenshot of Huffington Post's report on Prokhorov's presidential rap.



Source: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/> (accessed 12 April 2012).

*The Huffington Post* pointed to the video's surprising resonance in cyberspace, stating: 'The video circulated on Twitter and was reposted on several sports websites. Commentators acknowledged Prokhorov's performance as both horrible and charming' (Huffington Post 2012).

Voice of America (VOA) presents an interesting case study in old versus new media, as well as a platform that could not resist Prokhorov's allure as a 'news story.' Due to its genesis as an 'external broadcast institution' of the U.S. government (*read* propaganda tool), VOA is 'prohibited by law from disseminating its programming within the United States. All of our materials are intended for audiences outside the United States' (VOA 2012). Yet in the age of deterritorialized information and communications technologies, new media has made such 'official' restrictions utterly meaningless. According to the broadcaster's web site:

It started in 1942 as a radio news service for people living in closed and war-torn societies. It has grown into a multimedia broadcast service. VOA now reaches people on mobile devices and Facebook, through Twitter feeds and call-in programs – using the medium that works best for specific audiences (VOA 2012).

Rather than banning residents of the U.S. from accessing the content of VOA (as was effectively the case for most of the Cold War, as the territoriality of media prior to the advent of the Internet and the global proliferation of satellite television was generally guaranteed outside of certain samizdat channels), something that would contravene the very mission of the organization, VOA is as accessible to Americans as it is to any other nation around the globe. In fact, the author subscribed to his first Twitter feed (@VOA\_Moscow) while conducting research for this article (shortly followed by a subscription to outgoing President Medvedev's feed).

James Brooke, VOA's Moscow bureau chief, manages this Twitter feed and also contributes to the VOA Blog "Russia Watch" (<http://blogs.voanews.com/russia-watch/>). Brooke's coverage of the Russian presidential election shares some traits with mainstream "old media" coverage; however, the tone and mien differs markedly. His post on 22 February entitled 'Prokhorov Melts Hearts in Russia's Political Winter' (Brooke 2012) is a case in point. His essay focuses on how Mikhail Prokhorov, the 'bad boy bachelor billionaire' candidate, is able to vivify Evelina Zakamskaya, host of *Mneniia*/Opinions on the state-owned Rossiya 24. Zakamskaya, according to Brooke, is famous for her ability to stoically tolerate the lunatic ravings of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and the mind numbing palaver of the Kremlin's 'gray men in gray suits' with equal aplomb (Brooke 2012). This talent, however, was not in demand when Prokhorov came calling. The language employed in the essay would be better suited to the pages of *Playboy Magazine* than the gray pages of the *New York Times*; according to Brooke, Evelina 'lips glistened.... She hung on every word. She tittered at every attempted joke.... She locked her big baby blue eyes on his. She seemed to positively purr' (Brooke 2012). When it comes to describing Prokhorov, he describes the New Jersey Jets owner's 'power abs honed by daily two-hour workouts' (Brooke 2012). The blog then shifted to dismissing rumors about Prokhorov's sexual orientation (still a bachelor at age 46) by echoing the candidate's own Facebook posts about his enthusiasm for the opposite sex 'How will I become President without a First Lady? Let me tell you a secret: I had my first lady when I

was 17.’ VOA then reminded its readers of the current jest among Russians that Prokhorov is currently picking ‘his first lady, his second lady, his third lady’ and so on (Brooke 2012). Sex—it seems—sells on VOA’s digital streams.

**Image 3.** Screenshot of James Brooke’s blog.

The screenshot shows the VOA website interface. At the top left is the VOA logo and 'Voice of America'. To the right is a '70 YEARS' anniversary banner and a search bar. Below the header is a navigation menu with 'News', 'Programs', 'Video', 'Learning English', and 'About Us'. The main content area features a large 'RUSSIA WATCH' title with a Russian flag graphic. Below this is a sub-headline 'Prokhorov Melts Hearts in Russia's Political Winter' dated February 22, 2012. The article text describes an interview with Evelina Zakamskaya and mentions Mikhail Prokhorov. A photo of Evelina Zakamskaya is included with a caption. On the right, there's a bio for James Brooke, VOA Moscow bureau chief, and a photo of him holding a Russian flag.

*Source:* <http://blogs.voanews.com/russia-watch/> (accessed 12 April 2012).

## New Media as News

The most interesting aspect of the role of new media in the election came when the Michael McFaul, U.S. President Barack Obama’s former adviser on Eurasian affairs and the newly-appointed ambassador to Russia, landed himself in hot water over a post-election tweet. Only in the position since 22 February, McFaul tweeted: ‘Troubling to watch arrests of peaceful demonstrators at Pushkin Square...Freedom of assembly and freedom of speech are universal values’ (RIA Novosti 2012). The Kremlin reacted sharply, stating that the Russian security forces responded with a level of concern for protestor safety that easily outstripped that of the U.S police in removing Occupy protesters during 2011. The story took a bizarre twist when it was reported that McFaul’s Twitter account was hacked by pro-Russian activists who posted fraudulent criticisms of the election process, including at least one in Russian (McFaul claims to tweet only in English). The U.S. embassy in Moscow’s response to the brouhaha included that rather embarrassing defense that McFaul, a purported expert on all things Russian, did not speak Russian well enough to post the content found in the microblog.

**Image 4.** Screenshot of RT's web page covering the Russian presidential election.

**Presidential election 2012**

With all the ballots finally counted, the Central Election Commission has declared Vladimir Putin the winner with 63.6 per cent of the vote. A \$300 million webcam network and as many as half a million independent observers were deployed to ensure unprecedented electoral transparency following popular anger at voting violations in December's parliamentary poll.

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**ELECTION RESULTS**

Vladimir Zhirinovskiy	6.2%
Gennady Zyuganov	17.2%
Sergey Mironov	3.9%
Mikhail Prokhorov	7.9%
Vladimir Putin	63.6%

**The contenders: Dossiers**

<p><b>Vladimir Zhirinovskiy</b> One of the most controversial figures in Russian politics, this election veteran is known for his eccentric behavior.</p> <p><a href="#">Video profile</a></p>	<p><b>Gennady Zyuganov</b> His track record includes two decades at the helm of the Communist Party and narrowly losing the 1996 ballot.</p> <p><a href="#">Video profile</a></p>	<p><b>Sergey Mironov</b> A candidate in the 2004 ballot who encouraged support for Putin, he is not so ready to give his rival a boost now.</p> <p><a href="#">Video profile</a></p>	<p><b>Mikhail Prokhorov</b> Tycoon-turned-politician, he is the only one out of the five candidates with no previous experience of running for president.</p> <p><a href="#">Video profile</a></p>	<p><b>Vladimir Putin</b> Before becoming Prime Minister, he had already served two terms as Russia's president.</p> <p><a href="#">Video profile</a></p>
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Source: <http://rt.com/> (accessed 12 April 2012).

While McFaul ended up being one of the new media losers in the election, *Russia Today* (RT) was clearly the big winner. On the day after the election, four of the top five YouTube videos on the election were supplied by the broadcaster. The global satellite television network, which broadcasts in English, Arabic and Spanish, is a highly effective tool for Moscow as it seeks to promote a positive view of Russia on the world stage. While not 'officially' under government control, the broadcaster is closely affiliated with the Kremlin and generally adheres to a pro-government stance on most issues. Since the network went live in December 2005, RT is now the first (and sometimes the only) source for video footage, context and on-the-ground reporting when major events occur within the Russian Federation. As a result, RT's editors, journalists and film crews enjoy significant influence as media gatekeepers, at least in terms of televisual content. By choosing what and when to film, RT can now influence the imagery of many (if not most) news stories about the country. While the fiscal drivers of mainstream network and cable news broadcasts in the U.S. promote televisual 'piggy-backing' on RT video streams, ostensibly, cyberspace would allow greater diversity. However, as the results of my mini-sample of YouTube demonstrate, RT rules the roost even on the Anglophone web.

### Parting Thoughts

It is said that, in democracies at least, 'People get the government they deserve.' If this is the case, then it must also follow that in libertarian press systems, people get the media they de-

serve. Hockey rivalries, the sex lives of billionaires and videos of scuba-diving potentates—is this what we Americans deserve? It appears so. Yet, this conclusion begs another question: Would we have been better served by serious, penetrating news coverage of the Russian elections? Given the surety of the outcome and vacuity of the campaign, the cynic in me says no. From the vantage of the American-on-the-street (in the case of the #Occupy Movement, this can be taken literally), Russian politics figures little into their daily calculus until genuine change takes place. In the meantime, why not let the election generate a bit of infotainment? I say bring on Putin v. 2.0. But let him be warned: I expect to be entertained.

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