Biased, Political and Unedited: Journalism and Elections in the Russian Regional Press

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Introduction

Russian journalism has gone through significant changes during the last decade, but the result has not been “typical Western journalism” (if there is such a thing) and much of the old elements have been preserved. The media coverage of the Russian presidential elections of 1996 has been criticised for biased coverage and unequal opportunities of the candidates (Lange 1996: Monitoring... 1996 b). The monitoring team of the European Institute for the Media concluded that “the media coverage marred the fairness of the democratic process”: the candidates did not have equal opportunities to present their cases to the electorate and the media received and accepted specific instructions on how to cover the campaign (Monitoring... 1996 b, 81). Lack of active and critical reporting, of background information and analysis, and of debates and discussions, were also found in the coverage of the parliamentary elections of 1995 (Monitoring... 1996 a, 88).

This article focuses on the Karelian presidential (officially the leader bears the title Chairman of the Government) elections held in April–May 1998. As distinct from previous studies the emphasis is mainly on the practice of journalism and journalistic ways of presenting and framing the news. The material consists of the main papers of Karelia and any generalisations for other regions of Russia are only referential.

The Republic of Karelia is one of the ethnic republics of Russia situated in north-western Russia with a border with Finland. Approximately 75% of population are Russians and the ethnic minorities consist of Karelians (10%), Finns (2%) and Vepsians. Almost 90% of the population speaks Russian as their mother language followed by Karelian with 5%. The population of Karelia is about 800,000, of whom 280,000 live in the capital, Petrozavodsk (For administrative structure see Oksa & Varis 1994, 68–69).

In Petrozavodsk the traditional Soviet press consisted of a Russian daily Lenin'skaya Pravda (Leninist Truth), and the Finnish Neuvosto-Kareli (Soviet Karelia) and the youth newspaper Komsomolets (Komsomol' Member), of which the latter two came out three times a week. At the end of the 1980s the print run of Lenin'skaya Pravda was 130,000, of Komsomolets 40,000 and Neuvosto-Karjala 12,000 (of which 80% was subscribed to in Finland).

The traditional press structure began to change in 1989, when the first independent newspapers were founded. The first new, openly political newspapers did not survive the economic crises of 1991 and 1992, but new newspapers which were oriented to the everyday needs and interests of the people turned out to be successful. At the same time the circulation of the traditional newspapers collapsed. Weekly newspapers gained the leading role.

In spring 1998 the leading circulation belonged to the weekly TVR-Paneomara (founded in 1992) with 71,000 copies. It was followed by the weekly Guberniya (founded in 1996 – 39,000 copies) and Petrozavodsk (founded in 1991 – 35,000 copies). Severniy Kurier, the former Lenin’skaya Pravda renamed in 1991, had dropped to 14,000, but it was still the only daily (coming out five days a week). The minority newspapers had a minor role: the Finnish Karjalan Sanomat (formerly Neuvosto-Karjala) was printing 2,000 copies twice a week and the Karelian language weekly Oma Mua (founded in 1990), only 1,000 copies.

Elections for the Chairman of Karelia

The election for the Chairman of the Government (president) of the Republic of Karelia was held on 26 April and the runoff was on 17 May 1998. The main candidates were the incumbent Viktor Stepanov, supported by communists and the directors of large enterprises, and the reformed mayor of Petrozavodsk, Sergei Katanandov, supported by the Our Home Is Russia movement, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, and Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov (RFE/RL Newsline 27.4.1998). Vladimir Zhirinovskiy himself visited Petrozavodsk on 12 May to support “the last bad candidate” Katanandov (Severniy Kurier 13.5.1998).

There were also four other candidates: Sergei Blinnikov (prime minister of Karelia 1989–1994), Larisa Zlobina (independent MP for Karelia in the Russian Duma), Aleksandr Chazhengin (candidate of the Yabloko party) and Mariya Domaseva (president of the Karelian Women’s Union). Katanandov was the favourite in the opinion polls: at the beginning of March his support was 43% compared to 19% for Stepanov and 5% for both Blinnikov and Zlobina and finally 1% for Chazhengin (Karjalan Sanomat 28.3.1998).

In the first round of the elections Katanandov gained 39.2% and Stepanov 36.4%, followed by Chazhengin with 8.9%, Zlobina 4.4%, Blinnikov 3.5% and Domaseva 1.0% (of valid votes). In local elections held the same day, Karelians replaced more than half of the members of the republican legislature and the leaders of the districts. In the second round Katanandov won with 50.3% against 43.9% for Stepanov. A significant number of voters voted against all candidates in both rounds.
Katanandov, as an ex-mayor of Petrozavodsk, did surprisingly modestly in the city, with approximately 40% of votes in the first and 50% in the second round.

The main candidates differed from each other significantly. Stepanov was a communist politician and had the support of the republic’s Communist Party and other leftist groups. Katanandov was a pragmatic manager who did not formally belong to any political party. Katanandov was born in 1955 in Petrozavodsk to a well-known family of construction workers. Stepanov was born in 1947 to a rural family. (Russian Regional Report 3:17, 30.4.1998.)

The Karelian elections involved less political confrontation than the Russian presidential elections of 1996. Stepanov, although Communist, was not seen as a hard-liner but as an administrator, who voted in the Upper House of the Russian Parliament for the land code which allows selling and buying land and who had good relations with President Boris Yeltsin. Also, Karelian supporters of Aleksandr Lebed campaigned for Stepanov (Severnyi Kurier 9.4.1998) and the Yabloko leader Grigori Yavlinsky praised him as the most democratic governor of Russia (Narodnyi Advokat 20–24.4.1998).

Not even ethnicity was a main issue although Stepanov was Karelian and Katanandov Russian. The support of the Karelians was divided, although the Congress of Karelians urged voters to support Stepanov (see e.g., Karjalan Sanomat 11.4.1998, Helsingin Sanomat 24.4.1998). Some Karelian activists urged people to support Katanandov because Stepanov had done nothing for the Karelians (Karjalan Sanomat 13.5.1998).

Material and method

The research material of this article consists of four newspapers of different types: Severnyi Kurier, Petrozavodsk, Guberniya and Karjalan Sanomat. The different types of papers can be expected to have different coverage of the campaign. Severnyi Kurier, as a traditional newspaper, may still have elements of Soviet-type journalism. The city administration of Petrozavodsk is among the founders of the newspaper Petrozavodsk and it could be expected that this newspaper would support the ex-mayor of Petrozavodsk for the leadership of Karelia. Guberniya, on the other hand, can be defined as an independent newspaper, which means that it is not financed or owned by the state or municipal administration. The Finnish language Karjalan Sanomat represents the minority newspapers.

The period of analysis is April and May 1998 up to the second round of elections (17 May). All the items which were directly linked with the elections of the Chairman have been included. When a candidate was mentioned in a longer item which had only a minor reference to the candidates or to the elections, only those paragraphs which mentioned the candidate or the elections were counted. Items on politics which did not mention the elections or the candidates have been omitted. When a candidate was criticised, his actions presented in a negative light, or there was a clear request not to vote for that candidate, coverage is considered critical.

Internet versions of the newspapers have been used, which has some implications: first, coverage is counted as the number of words in items dealing with a candidate or elections; second, some issues of the newspaper were not available on the web-server, so they could not be included (the missing issues were Severnyi Kurier of 17 and 25 April, Petrozavodsk – 3 April and 15 May, and Guberniya – 30 April); and third, the photographs have also not been included. Severnyi Kurier published all its material (except advertisements) on its internet version, but Guberniya and Petrozavodsk included only part of it (it seems that practically all the political news have been included on the Internet versions). For Karjalan Sanomat the paper version was used and the coverage is measured traditionally in column centimetres. For Karjalan Sanomat the space for photographs has also been counted.

Amount and characteristics of the coverage

The coverage of elections peaked in the last week before the first round and before the second round. The coverage was already almost non-existent two days before the elections in accordance with the law on elections.

The coverage was concentrated on the two main candidates, Stepanov and Katanandov. Katanandov was clearly favoured in the Russian-language media, but Stepanov got more coverage in Karjalan Sanomat before the first round.

Severnyi Kurier offered the greatest amount of material about the candidates. Approximately half of its coverage was on Stepanov and only less than 10% on the minor candidates. Severnyi Kurier put great effort into the coverage of elections. The elections were clearly the main news and the paper even twice published a special section (23.4. and 14.5.) with letters and other material about the elections. Severnyi Kurier offered coverage of both the main candidates, but the coverage on Stepanov was mainly critical and the coverage on Katanandov was mainly favourable.

Guberniya and Petrozavodsk used much less space for electoral coverage. In Guberniya the amount of coverage was relatively small. There was more coverage for Katanandov, but the difference was caused by the letters published (possibly paid advertisement). The only sign of bias was the item in which Katanandov answered the questions of the voters (Guberniya 15.5.1998). In Guberniya the elections were not among the main news items.

Petrozavodsk gave major coverage to the elections only in issues just before the poll. On 15 May, for example, Petrozavodsk published several letters in which people from different professions praised Katanandov’s work and his manifesto.

Katanandov received approximately 75% of the total coverage both in Guberniya and Petrozavodsk. Consequently Stepanov was almost invisible both in Guberniya and in Petrozavodsk. Guberniya remained relatively neutral while Petrozavodsk published letters which criticised Stepanov.
Despite criticism against Stepanov there was almost nothing to balance this out. Stepanov received a word mention in a few news reports about his press conferences and some press releases from the Karelian government were published. In letters Stepanov was mainly criticised or mildly supported. Supportive letters, however, were in the minority.

During the campaign Stepanov signed several decrees which provided support for different groups of people and which solved acute problems, e.g., he decided to allow a new building for a tuberculosis hospital. This policy was also criticised as populist and too late an awakening to the problems which had been acute already earlier.

Stepanov received neutral, or mildly favourable coverage through his visits to the regions of Karelia, especially in *Karjalan Sanomat*. In *Severnyi Kurier* the visits were covered with materials from the press service of the Karelian government.

**Praise for Katanandov**

Katanandov was the focus of the major part of the coverage in all of the newspapers. However, the bias was not as quantitatively significant as the differences in tone. Katanandov was presented mainly in a positive light. *Severnyi Kurier* and *Petrozavodsk* also published Katanandov’s manifesto. Even *Karjalan Sanomat* published Katanandov’s manifesto (part of it) in Finnish translation, but only on 6 May, after the first round.

Criticism against Katanandov was published mostly as an example of criticism presented in other newspapers (like those set up for Stepanov’s campaign) and shown to be groundless. Katanandov, for example, was blamed for giving money for the construction of fountains and embankments and rumours were spread that the city of Petrozavodsk was about to go bankrupt. Both *Severnyi Kurier* (28.4.1998) and *Petrozavodsk* (24.4.1998) rejected this criticism by publishing an article by the head of finances of Petrozavodsk. The article was not headlined as a rejoinder or an opinion, but was published as a commentary (with slight differences between the newspapers due to editing). An attempt was made to link Katanandov to organised crime.

On the other hand, a major part of the coverage was concentrated on the role Katanandov had in cleaning up and reforming the city. Katanandov was praised as a good manager. Katanandov also made several visits to the regions and they were also covered.

*Guberniya*, which generally had relatively indifferent coverage of the elections, on 15 May published answers from Sergei Katanandov to questions of the electorate. The opportunity to ask questions by phone was announced a week earlier in *Guberniya*.

**Other candidates invisible**

For other candidates the coverage was far from comprehensive. It was even difficult to find out who the other candidates were, not to mention their aims. They appeared most often only when all the candidates were mentioned (and such items were few). There were no articles presenting the differences between the candidates or giving basic information about them. In *Severnyi Kurier* the other candidates got 8% of the coverage and in other newspapers their share was even smaller.

Blinnikov was hardly mentioned in the papers. Some items about Zlobina, as a member of the Russian parliament for Karelia, were published in *Severnyi Kurier*. A single letter to the editor thanked Domaseva for her help for a sick child (the elections or her candidacy was not mentioned). In some letters Chazhengin and Zlobina were credited as undercover supporters of Stepanov. A report of a meeting of Domaseva with students was also published with emphasis on the fact that not a single student appeared (*Karjalan Sanomat* 22.4.1998).

After 27 April the other candidates were presented only in terms of the results for the first round and in the negotiations for their support of the remaining candidates. Zlobina urged the voters to vote for Katanandov, as did the manager of Chazhengin’s campaign. Stepanov reported that he had had discussions over co-operation with Domaseva and Chazhengin. The minor role of the other candidates is manifested even in the reporting of the results. All the papers reported the number of votes for the main candidates but some of them left the others with passing mention, such as “the other candidates came out significantly worse” (*Karjalan Sanomat* 29.4.1998).
Coverages in different types of texts

News stories

The news was not the main part of the coverage (see table below) because only about one fourth of the coverage could be classified as news or a feature story (i.e., items written by journalists containing no comments by the author).

The direct speech of the candidates was predominant in some of the news reports. They started as news but were soon transformed into the direct speech of a candidate or text from a press release. An example is the coverage of the visit by both Stepanov and Katanov to Sortavala. Stepanov visited Sortavala on 6 April. Severnyi Kurier reported the following in a column of short news from the regions:

On 6 April V. Stepanov made a visit to Sortavala. Here he met with workers of the sovkhoz “Bolshevik” and other agro-

cultural enterprises, with budget-paid workers of the town, with citizens of Helya. In the evening a general meeting took place at the officers’ mess.

(Severnyi Kurier 7.4.1998)

The same item also included information about visits to other regions and no other news about Stepanov’s visit to Sortavala was published. In sharp contrast to this was the coverage of the visit by Katanov to Sortavala. The paper published a section “Sortavala: yesterday, today and tomorrow” and in it the correspondent of Severnyi Kurier in Sortavala, Aleksandr Vikhrov, almost exclusively used quotations from the speech of the candidate:

“Treat the Reforms with Care”

At the end of March Sergei Katanov, a candidate for the post of Chairman of the government of Karelia, visited Sortavala, where he met with workers of the enterprises of the town.

- Let us choose the executive on the basis of concrete actions, not because of beautiful eyes — said Sergei Katanov opening one of the meetings. — The economic situation in Karelia is critical. Judging by the reports of our government, it is as if economic growth has started in our republic, but visit any region and, really, no growth is visible. It is necessary to remember that it is still possible to revive. If we wait for a change for the better, we have to realise that no one other than us can carry out those changes.

The introductory speech of the ex-mayor of Petrozavods’k was not a long one. As a man of action, he preferred at once to answer questions. And the questions were by no means easy.

(Severnyi Kurier 9.4.1998)

Later the report becomes an interview in question-answer form. It differs from a typical Western news story mainly because the voice of the candidate is more present and the words of the candidate are not interpreted or contextualised by the narrative voice of the story (on positions of voices in journalism, see Kunelius 1996). In principle there is nothing bad in this kind of reporting. But when one of the candidates is given the right to speak directly to the public in the news item while the other is confined to press releases and short news briefs, a problem of bias may emerge.

Another example are the news reports about the press conferences after the first round (Katanov held his conference 27 April and Stepanov on 28 April). They, too, indicate some difference in the coverage of candidates. In Severnyi Kurier the report on Katanov’s conference contained 615 words and about Stepanov’s conference 711 words.

Katanov was quoted directly six times and these citations contained 174 words. Katanov’s direct speech was surrounded by the narrative of the text which put it into context. The narrative voice of the text remained invisible, no first person was used and the connections were shown as a result of common reasoning. The report resembled a typical Western political news story a lot. Besides the “neutral” news report, Katanov was also allowed to publish also his personal letter to the voters beside it.

Stepanov, on the other hand, was quoted directly only once but his quotation was 367 words long and it was broken only once with a journalist’s comment in parenthesis. This choice was even explained in a preface by the journalist: “Stepanov already shed light on several questions in his speech. And because the tone of these remarks was very personal, it is not possible to avoid direct speech”. In this direct speech Stepanov was allowed to reply to the charges that he has, e.g., a villa in Nice. Stepanov also criticised Katanov’s team for severe criticism against him.

After the words of Stepanov the journalist commented on them in the first person: “In my opinion, you should not criticise or praise your opponent. And even more so not to interpret questionable facts to your advantage (...) and not to give emotional appraisals, which, rather, should be for journalists to do. The task of the candidate for a high governmental post is to show that he is good, not that the rival is bad.” (Severnyi Kurier 30.4.1998)

Stepanov’s words were commented and refuted by a journalist in the first person while Katanov was presented in an “objective” way. Katanov’s criticism against Stepanov was presented in journalistic text “as a fact” and not commented on by journalists.

After the second round Severnyi Kurier took the election result news from the Interfax news agency. This can, on the one hand, be seen as the poor practice of not producing one’s own news, but also as the growing role of informative news produced in news agencies in a more neutral and effective way.

For Karjalans Sanomat the figures are expressed in terms of column centimetres, while for other newspapers, by the number of words.

Interviews and polls

The interview is one the classic genres of the Soviet press and it has retained its position in contemporary Russian journalism. The interview is also common in Western political journalism. In Karelian elections coverage, among the persons interviewed were not only candidates and electoral assistants, but also supporters. For example, in Severnyi Kurier on 21 April, an interview with Liliya Stepanova, the director of cultural affairs of Petrozavods’k, concentrated both on her life and the appraisal of the positive role which Katanov had had in the city. Katanov was the only candidate to be interviewed during the campaign in Petrozavods’k (24.4.1998). Guberniya published
Table 1. Total coverage and the share of critical material in different types of stories. K = Katanandov, S = Stepanov, O = Other candidates

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Severny Kurier</th>
<th>Guberniya</th>
<th>Petrozavodsk</th>
<th>Karjalan Sanomat</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>K.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Press releases, manifests and letters of the candidates</td>
<td>2556</td>
<td>1309</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>334</td>
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<tr>
<td>Letters to the editor</td>
<td>9025</td>
<td>11964</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>143</td>
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<tr>
<td>News reports</td>
<td>6911</td>
<td>9584</td>
<td>443</td>
<td>61</td>
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<tr>
<td>Editorial commentaries</td>
<td>1629</td>
<td>5429</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>1057</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>25312</td>
<td>30016</td>
<td>4783</td>
<td>1560</td>
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Commentsaries

When a Russian newspaper is concerned, it is not always easy to find out what is news and what is commentary. Only commentaries which can be clearly recognised as such (no news in the same item) are included and the rest have been analysed as news and feature.

Editorials proper concentrated mainly on elections in general. *Severny Kurier* published two editorials on elections (an editorial appears only occasionally). On 9 April the editor in chief advised the voters to vote with their heads and not with their hearts, to make a pragmatic, rational choice, although not giving any recommendation on which candidate to choose (*Severny Kurier* 9.4.1998).

On 22 April the editor in chief asked if the promised reasonable and calm campaign had become a fight of ideas or a fight between men. He criticised especially the team of the incumbent, blaming it for carrying out an aggressive campaign: "Why adopt such methods? When there are no positive ideas, you have to create a witch hunt. The strategists from the team of the incumbent are busy with this." (*Severny Kurier* 22.4.1998.)

Letters to the editor

The major part of the coverage in *Severny Kurier* consists of letters to the editor. A similar phenomenon was also seen in Karelian newspapers during the Russian presidential elections of 1996. The letters were either typical "letters to the editor", in which a private person writes about his ideas and feelings, or letters signed by a specialist with both a profession and place of employment. This practice has long roots in Soviet journalism, in which the ideal was to provide the outside writer (worker and peasant correspondents) with a genuine role in journalism and a significant amount of column space was devoted to them.

In the letters the authors recounted their difficulties, experiences of the candidates and urged people to vote for one of the candidates. There was not much debate in the sense of rejoinders in the form of another letter. Some letters commented and usually rejected criticism presented elsewhere.

Most of the letters were signed by a single individual (there were also some letters with several signatures) writing in his own name, and usually also the profession or the place of residence was noted. Among the collective letters was a public letter to the candidate Katanandov by the leaders of children's and youth organisations, where the leaders presented their demands and proposals to the candidate (*Severny Kurier* 14.4.1998).

Some letters were directed to the candidates themselves, especially during the last days of the campaign. The authors asked the candidates to stop the attacks against the other candidates.

Unedited and partisan materials

A remarkable share of coverage consisted of materials which were or openly partisan nature or which came unedited from sources outside the newsroom. Among them were both press releases and manifests of the candidates as well as individual letters.
The coverage in perspective

The media agenda in the Karelian elections was biased in two ways: first, the coverage concentrated on two main candidates. Second, there was a qualitative discrepancy in the coverage of the main candidates. Stepanov was mostly criticised, Katanandov praised. Supporters of Katanandov were allowed to reply to criticism, while Stepanov or his supporters did not get a similar opportunity.

One reason for qualitative bias was the structure of the coverage. The coverage was more fair in the news than in letters or commentaries. However, the prominence of materials other than news made the overall coverage clearly biased.

In the Russian presidential elections of 1996 the bias towards Yeltsin was explained by direct and indirect pressure put on the media by the authorities, the advantage of being the incumbent, the considerable resources available to the incumbent and voluntary co-operation on the part of journalists, who were afraid of losing their freedom if Zyuganov won (Lange 1997, 174). These explanations do not really apply to the Karelian elections. The incumbent was not favoured, the journalists were not afraid of losing their freedom and the incumbent did not use his resources to influence the established newspapers but rather he decided to set up his own political newspapers. The question about pressure is more difficult to answer: the pressure also might have originated in the city administration. Karjala Sanomat, which was more balanced or biased in favour of Stepanov, was the most dependent on subsidies from the Karelian government.

One of the explanations for the bias could be the differences in campaign strategies: perhaps Katanandov was better equipped and more ready to carry out a campaign which gave him coverage in newspapers. Katanandov, for example, published his own manifesto which also appeared in Severny Kurier, Petrozavodsk and in almost all district newspapers of Karelia. If we can trust the words of Anatoli Osipov, the editor-in-chief of Severny Kurier, Stepanov did not publish his own manifesto so that “the electors would get a chance to put the two documents side by side, compare them and make an objective choice” (Severny Kurier 22.4.1998). On the other hand, no journalistic effort was made to provide this kind of information to the voters. Katanandov may have got more coverage because of his campaign strategy, but journalism did not actively search for balanced information.

Stepanov could make his voice heard in the campaign newspapers Narodni Advokat [People’s Advocate] and Karelskoe Obozrenie [Karelian Review], which were distributed free of charge, and Chazhenin had the support of Yabloko Karelia [Yabloko of Karelia]. But Katanandov was also generous with leaflets and campaign brochures, although he had the support of the main newspapers.

Another explanation for bias is that the press consciously favoured Katanandov because of his political standpoints or because of his leading position in opinion polls. In this case a more honest approach would have been to declare this support clearly (although even the newspapers which supported Stepanov declared independence).

Why did journalism present the campaign as it did? The question is not so much about partisanship of journalism but about both the structure of society and the relationships between journalism and society.

Soviet society has been defined as a “fake modern” society in which traditional relations between people remained important (Srubar 1991). Much of it has been preserved in contemporary Russia, and the breakdown of the economy has further strengthened the traditional elements (like social networks and the decline of the monetary economy). Even politics is often seen in terms of interpersonal relations (Pirinen 1997, 215).

The weakness of organised civil society on the other hand makes politics the battleground for the elite. This also has consequences for the media. In a society in which the intermediary sphere between private and state is weak, the few available connections (like the media) with people become crucial for politicians. Although, there are still examples of the continued importance of interpersonal communication. For example, in Kursk “everybody knew” when and where Aleksandr Rutskoi was having his campaign meeting although his candidacy was not mentioned either in official or opposition media (Shaitov & Nechayev 1997, 63).

The practice of giving space to candidates themselves can be explained by the role that politicians have in society. In contemporary Russia the words of politicians “have such a status that they can be presented in the
public sphere almost on their own”, as Kunelius (1996, 176) said about the speeches of Finnish presidents in the early 1950s, or at least journalists seem to think so.

Russian political journalism gives more space to the candidates, the actors outside journalism and to the citizenry than contemporary Western journalism. This by no means suggests that there is no journalistic control over the coverage. It is perhaps only done in a different way: instead of framing the stories or interpreting the situation, it can also be made by choosing the persons interviewed or letters and news releases published.

Journalism in perspective

In many respects current Russian journalism resembles the previous phases of Western journalism. Like Jan Ekecrantz’s “unedited society” in Sweden in 1910: society is not edited, it is not organised into a text by a relatively autonomous institution of journalism. The newspapers publish information arriving in the newsroom, often without major editing. During the development of journalism the relationships between journalism and other institutions have changed: the previous text providers have become sources of the news. (Ekecrantz & Olsson 1994, 129.)

Objective news journalism is a result of its development stages; through the finding of facts (in the 1830s), belief in facts (up to 1900), disbelief in facts (in the first decades of this century) and the finding of objectivity (1920s) (Schudson 1978), and has started as a commercial alternative in a highly competitive press market, this becoming a universally accepted way of producing journalism (Ekecrantz & Olsson 1994).

Chalaby (1996) defines journalism as an Anglo-American invention which was imported to France and other countries. This idea of cultural diffusion of journalistic practices is also relevant in the case of Karelia: compared to the other newspapers, Karjalan Sanomat was surprisingly “Western” and news-oriented, which can be explained by the close co-operation of the newspaper with Finns.

Russian “traditional” political journalism (represented in this study by Severnyi Kurier) is very much political. It discusses and produces propaganda rather than informs, it is very visible in its comments, it makes people participants (and on the other hand excludes other people) and listeners from the political discourse (as opposed to spectators). This kind of journalism declares a linkage with the public, pays much attention to letters to the editor and tries to advise its readers. The idea of influencing public affairs is kept alive and journalism tries to take a moral stand in public affairs. In this kind of political journalism there is no place for a rational choice for the other candidate. Only one truth is accepted. This strategy, however, has not proved to be successful, because the circulation of old newspapers keep on falling and the new, more entertaining and apolitical newspapers attract new readers.

Russian political journalism is not about politics but it is politics: in this public sphere candidates (at least those favoured by the newspaper), voters and, to a lesser extent, journalists can present their opinions and judgements on politics. The reader is to a great extent a participant who is supposed to have knowledge of the issues and persons mentioned in journalism. As the Karelian Oma mua put it when it presented two ethnic Karelian candidates for the Legislative Assembly, “The reader knows both of these men” (Oma mua 21.3.1998). There is no need to present them in more detail or to compare their aims.

Another aspect of this journalism is that the reader is also a voter whose opinions journalism may have and over which should have influence. When Karjalan Sanomat reported the visit of Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the journalist compared the situation to Germany at the beginning of the 1930s and continued: “There is no need to repeat the unscrupulous speech of Mr. Zhirinovsky, which did not follow any widely recognised behavioural norms. For him there are no laws and no opinions of others”. (Karjalan Sanomat 16.5.1998.) And the newspaper did not report what Mr. Zhirinovsky said, but criticised him.

If traditional Soviet and Russian journalism was mainly political agitation and propaganda, the pressure of the market adds new elements: apoliticisation has proved to be a successful option after the highly political press of perestroika. It is perhaps no mistake to conclude that the real competition has not yet started and there is (so far) no market for objective, unbiased political news.

The new press declares indifference to politics. Like the American penny press of the 1830s (see Schudson 1978, 21–22) the new newspapers of Karelia declare that they will write “nothing about politics” (first issue of TVR, May 1992). They try to stay away from politics and to concentrate on the private lives and problems of the people. Although many of these problems are political they do not appear in newspapers as political. Politics is defined in terms of high level issues and conflicts (like presidential elections or questions about official languages) which can only harm private citizens.

The division between quality and popular newspapers has been one of the features of the Western journalism. In Russia this division is emerging (see e.g., Lange 1997, 190), but the result is not the division between quality (balanced, sophisticated, unemotional) and popular (entertaining, populist partisan, emotional) press. The popular newspapers are closer to their Western counterparts than the counterparts of the “quality newspapers”, which, at least in Karelia, still are partisan in the sense that they speak in the name of one group and try not to represent “the common man” in politics. The competition is not between quality and popular, but between political (partisan) and apolitical, entertaining newspapers.

The drop of circulations and the distancing from political journalism may indicate that readers are not satisfied with political journalism which proposes its own conclusions to the audience and which serves more as a public discussion forum than a source of news. Opinion polls also indicated this kind of approach: in December 1997, 71% of citizens thought that the main task of the media is to “give information about the events and current affairs in the country and the world.”
and only 27% chose an alternative "to express public opinion and the mood of the people" and a mere 10% were of the opinion that the media should serve as a medium of agitation and formation of political positions (people interviewed gave an average two answers) (Fond obshchestvennoe mnenie 1997).

When asked about the current (not ideal) role of journalists, 37% of those questioned said that journalists are spokespersons of public interests, 33% called them observers of life and informants of society, while 28% had the opinion that journalists are mainly "hunters for sensation and for hot facts". A critical 15% believed journalists to be "servants of power and of rich and influential people" and 14% - "manipulators of public opinion" (Fond obshchestvennoe mnenie 1997).

The professional values of journalists have also been changing. According to Dzyaloshinsky the "authoritarian-technocratic" type of professional ideology almost disappeared between 1992 and 1995, "humanitarian" ideology rose in popularity first but in 1994 the "informative-cognitive" ideology gained overwhelming popularity among journalists. (Dzyaloshinsky 1996, 156–157, see also Zhurnalista i zhurnalista Rossiiskoi provintsii 1995; Davis, Hammond & Nizanova 1998, 84).

Conclusions

Russian journalism is changing, but there is no single direction. Among the several directions in which Russian journalism is going can be found, first, the partisan political journalism represented by political newspapers and some partisan journalists and stories inside the main press. The second direction comes close to Western public journalism, which gives the ordinary people a voice, or at least some of the citizenry. This direction can be found in the important position given to the letters to the editor in Severnyi Kurier. The third direction is apolitical, entertaining journalism which can be found in new newspapers. For these the elections were not a major issue.

Is it likely that Russian journalism will develop in the same direction as Western journalism? The factors behind the development of Western journalism, capitalism and market relations, the pressure of market forces and the increasing significance of consumerism are phenomena which, with reasonable probability, will shape the development of Russian society as well. If the place of journalism in society is going to be the same as in Western Europe and North America, the mediator of information and creator of common ground in a highly diverse society, then development will in many ways follow the Western models. From the points of view of marketing, for example, voluntary support for one candidate is unprofitable, first because of loss in potential circulation and second because of loss of revenue from political advertisement.

Attention should be paid to two further preconditions. First, professional news journalism seems to presuppose widely accepted common values, which give journalism the chance to speak in the name of us all. Actually, in reality these "common values" may be constructed by journalism or by the hegemonic ideology of society. Anyhow, when a society is divided like present-day Russia (not fragmented as are Western societies) and when there is no wide consensus on the basic issues of that society, all issues become politicised. Second, professional news journalism which puts the sources and actors in "proper context" do emerge after the sources (politicians, specialists) have lost their authority to speak directly to the public and to define the frame in which reality is presented in journalism. In Russia the politicians and other sources still have power to define the reality in journalism.

Other options for the development of (press) journalism may also be possible. The role of television as the main source of news could restrict the development of newspapers (although this is not likely without significant localisation of television programming) so that newspapers may either remain political organs or sources of entertainment. Journalism may also stay dependent of narrow political and economic interests, which may result in a different kind of journalism, and a different place for journalism in society.

References:

Research material:

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Guberniya, Petrozavodsk (Russia) 2.4–14.5.1998
Karjalan Sanomat, Petrozavodsk (Russia) 1.4–16.5.1998
Web versions of the newspapers can be found through a common English reference page at http://www.karelia.ru/Karelia/smi_e.html. For Severnyi Kurier entire issues (advertisement excluded) is included, and for Petrozavodsk and Guberniya, only parts of the issues.

A paper version of Karjalan Sanomat has been used instead of the Internet version.

Other newspaper sources:

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Notes:

1 The amount of text in one issue of the weeklies Petrozavodsk and Guberniya equals approximately 75% of text in five issues of the daily Severnyi Kurier.
2 Because in the second round Stepanov received 40.5% and Katanandov 56.5% of the votes in Pudozh, it is unlikely that 14 randomly elected persons would support only one candidate. The other street polls included supporters of both candidates.
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Monitoring... (1996 a): Monitoring the media coverage of the 1995 Russian parliamentary elections. Düsseldorf: European Institute for the Media.


