



The Movement for the Defense of Voters' Rights "Golos"
golosinfo.org

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Analytical report

Censorship and manipulation: How the media affected the outcome of the presidential election in Russia

Respect for equality of candidates' rights in the mass media during the 2018 presidential election in Russia

The movement "Golos" conducted a media monitoring program to analyze the situation in the media regarding observing constitutionally protected election principles during the presidential election campaign in the Russian Federation.

From 22 January till 18 March 2018, "Golos" carried out weekly monitoring of five central TV channels.¹ The movement analyzed election-relevant content of news reports of the Channel One, Russia 1, NTV, Ren-TV, and Channel Five. For many Russians, television is one of the main sources of information. During the election campaign, it has a decisive influence on the opinion of most voters about the elections and the candidates.²

Within the framework of the monitoring program, "Golos" conducted a quantitative analysis of media mentions each candidate received based on the data from the "Medialogy" system. The system analyzes 40,805 sources, including 11 federal TV channels, 36 radio stations, 528 magazines, 540 news agencies, 1,974 newspapers, 34,905 online media sources, and 2,574 blogs; it covers all regions of Russia. The database is updated daily. The observation period using the "Medialogy" system covered the official time of the election campaign (18 December 2017 – 18 March 2018).

"Golos" expresses its gratitude to the team of volunteers who for two months analyzed the news releases of the central television channels, and to regional long-term observers of "Golos" whose information is also used in this report.

Conclusions

¹ <https://www.golosinfo.org/ru/hod-kampanii-2018>.

² On 16 January, "Golos" issued an emergency statement on illegal campaigning on TV channels during the election campaign, which was supported by a number of candidates.

The content and volume of information in a large portion of the Russian media about the course of the presidential election and the participating candidates was biased, suggesting a planned and coordinated political campaign. Despite the constitutional prohibition of censorship, there is every reason to believe that censorship is taking place, at least in regard to the restrictions on spreading an alternative (oppositional) view to the current government in state and municipal media. The authorities' interference in the electoral information campaign and the restriction of free political discussion significantly influenced the results of the election and made it less possible for voters to make an informed choice.

Throughout the election campaign, there was a quantitative and qualitative imbalance in the coverage of candidates by the media. In terms of the number of media mentions, the leader had an almost ten-fold advantage over his closest competitors. This was largely ensured by the administrative control of most media.

The media, primarily those under state control or ownership, failed to fulfill their obligation of providing voters with objective and complete information about the ongoing election and the program proposals of the candidates.

Networks of different media under the authorities' control participated in the manipulative coverage of the election campaign—they set certain "frameworks" through which the individual candidates were to be perceived. These media all used the same patterns, forming a carnivalized, scandalous image of opposition candidates. Even the chosen format of the election campaign "debate" did not help to clarify the politically important positions of the candidates.

Most media took the incumbent president out of the framework of the election campaign, artificially pitting him in this way against the other candidates. Vladimir Putin was represented in the media primarily as the head of state, and was portrayed in television newscasts with extreme restraint and mainly through comments from his representatives and supporters.

In a situation in which real public political discussion was lacking, the opposition candidates were not ready to conduct an active campaign and did not find ways to withstand the pressures of the state and state media.

The system of election commissions failed to ensure the equality of candidates in terms of access to the media. Formed by election commissions, working groups on information disputes proved unable to provide effective electoral advice to election organizers.

Recommendations

The CEC of Russia needs to ensure the equality and neutrality of information on candidates in state-owned media. It is necessary for the CEC to conduct its own monitoring of the broadcast programs to identify unequal and biased campaign coverage and take quick and effective measures against those who violate the law. The "Golos" movement believes that such monitoring is necessary and that its methodology and results should be open to the public and

published on a regular basis. Similar recommendations have been voiced by the OSCE/ODIHR for many years.

Failure of the incumbent president or other officials running for the presidency to leave their post for the period of the election campaign significantly distorts the information field and leads to a violation of the principle of equality of candidates' rights. To prevent this, it is necessary at the legislative level to take measures that really guarantee equal coverage of candidates' activities in the mass media.

The concept of "informing" and "campaigning" should be more clearly separated in the media. It is necessary to define "campaigning" more precisely and to develop a methodology for its identification. This is necessary in order to minimize the subjective and biased evaluation of the media content and to increase to ensure compliance with the law. At the same time, the principle of formation and the activities of the so-called "working groups on information disputes" should be changed—such groups should offer an external independent expert assessment, in which they should include, first of all, representatives of supervisory and journalistic public associations (self-regulating organizations) and the academic community.

The format of the so-called election campaign "debates" and other joint campaigning events require legislative consolidation to guarantee the right of voters to receive objective information. "Golos" suggests extending to the presidential candidates the norm of mandatory participation in debates, which is applied to other elections in the country.

The revealed system imbalance in the freedom of the media requires legislative correction to return the situation to the "constitutional track." Legislative regulation of the instruments of state participation in media activities, including their financing, must guarantee the media's real, not only nominal, independence.

Quantitative inequality in the coverage of Russia's presidential candidates

Disproportions in media coverage of candidates

The 2018 presidential campaign continued the disproportionate coverage of candidates' activities in the mass media traditional for Russian elections. The activities of the "candidate from power" were covered much more extensively than those of other candidates. This disproportion in the coverage is huge—the number of mentions of Vladimir Putin in the Russian media was consistently 10 times higher than of his nearest competitors in the election race. This means that on average Putin had 100,000 mentions a week against 10,000 for Grudinin and Sobchak. Which is more, many of the reports that contained information about other candidates had Vladimir Putin as the main character. For example, in 30,676 January publications with a reference to Ksenia Sobchak, Vladimir Putin was mentioned 17,240 times, out of which about 7,500 times he was the chief subject.

According to the data of the "Medialogy" system, the number of Vladimir Putin's media mentions is more than twice that of all other candidates combined (Figure 1).

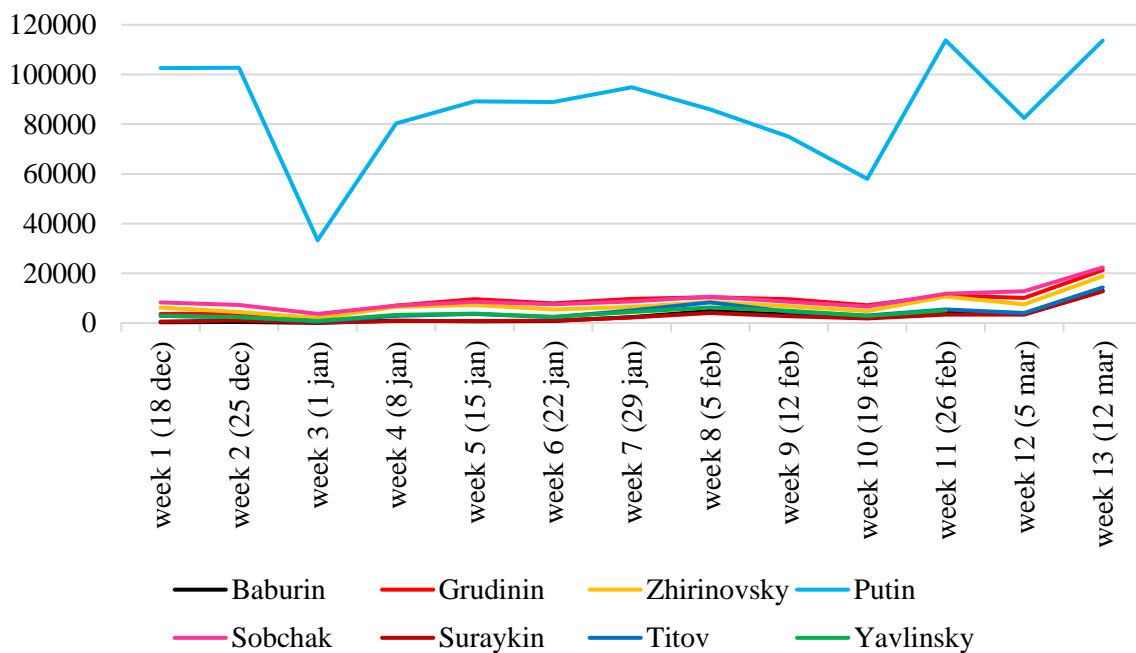


Fig. 1. Number of mentions of candidates according to the data of the “Medialogy” system

At the same time, a significant part of the stories in which Vladimir Putin was mentioned were not informative but clearly had a campaigning nature. On 16 January, the “Golos” movement issued an [emergency statement](#) on illegal campaigning on TV channels during the election campaign. The statement was supported by several presidential candidates. On 24 January, the CEC of Russia held the first meeting of the “Working Group on Information Disputes,” at which the “Golos” statement was considered along with complaints by several candidates on unequal campaign coverage in the media and illegal campaigning. The working group did not recognize the obvious violations by several TV channels.

According to the total number of mentions, after Vladimir Putin came Pavel Grudinin and Ksenia Sobchak, who had similar numbers, followed by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, Grigory Yavlinsky, Boris Titov, Maxim Suraykin, and Sergey Baburin (Figure 2). The last three received 2,000-3,000 mentions per week.

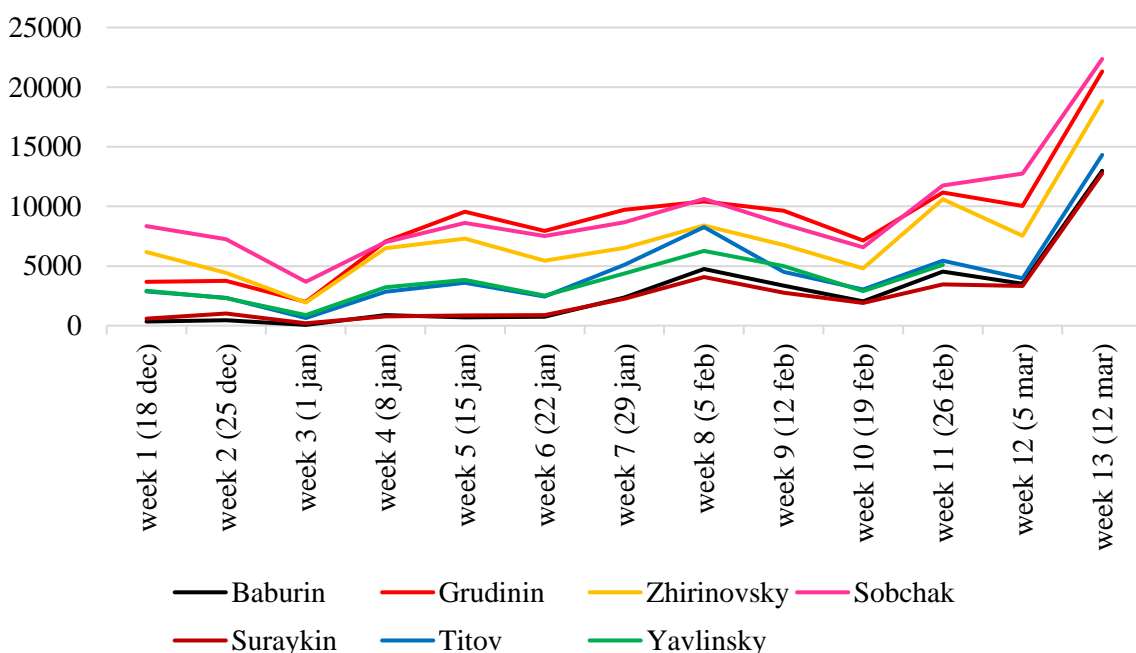


Fig. 2. Number of candidate mentions according to the data of the “Medialogy” system (without Vladimir Putin)

This disproportion in coverage is due to the fact that one of the candidates, namely the incumbent president, did not leave his post during the election campaign.

Broad information about the official activities of President Vladimir Putin became fodder for the election campaign of candidate Putin. For the entire campaign period, Vladimir Putin appeared as a candidate only a few times: on 27 December 2017, he [personally submitted documents to the CEC of Russia](#), as required by law; on 10 January 2018, he [took part in the opening](#) of his election headquarters in Moscow; on 30 January 2018, he [met](#) with his official representatives; on 3 March 2018, he [participated in a campaign rally](#) in Luzhniki, Moscow.

The central event of Vladimir Putin’s election campaign was the president's annual address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. This event led to a sharp increase in the number of his media mentions on 1 March 2018, in the eleventh week of elections. “Golos” emphasizes **that this event, in its constitutional nature, should not have been related to the election campaign at all**: according to the constitution, it should have happened in December 2017, before the campaign start. **This manipulation of the constitutional norm, accomplished using of the advantages of Putin’s official position, allowed the presidential candidate to artificially create unreasonable advantages for himself during the election campaign.**

A noteworthy event was the broadcast of Oliver Stone's multi-episode film "Putin" on Channel One at the very height of the election campaign. A preview of the film shown on 5 February caused a wave of indignation among candidates and citizens; however, the CEC [did not perceive this to be an action related to campaigning](#).

Coverage of candidates in electoral news reports on central television channels

"Golos" carried out a separate monitoring of election reports in the news programs of the five largest federal TV channels (Channel One, Russia 1, NTV, Ren-TV, and Channel Five). Monitoring was carried out on a weekly basis, starting from the 6th week of the election (22 January).

It is important to note that, according to the number of references in election news reports, Vladimir Putin trails behind Pavel Grudinin. The order from greatest to least in terms of the number of references is: Grudinin, Putin, Zhirinovskiy (Figure 6). These three candidates got 55% of all mentions: 24% for Grudinin, 17% for Putin, and 13% for Zhirinovskiy.

Vladimir Putin was the undisputed leader in the number of mentions only once—in the 7th week of the campaign, when he met with his representatives. His leadership in the number of mentions during the 8th and 13th week is not so significant in comparison to the prevalence of mentions of Pavel Grudinin relative to other candidates in other weeks.

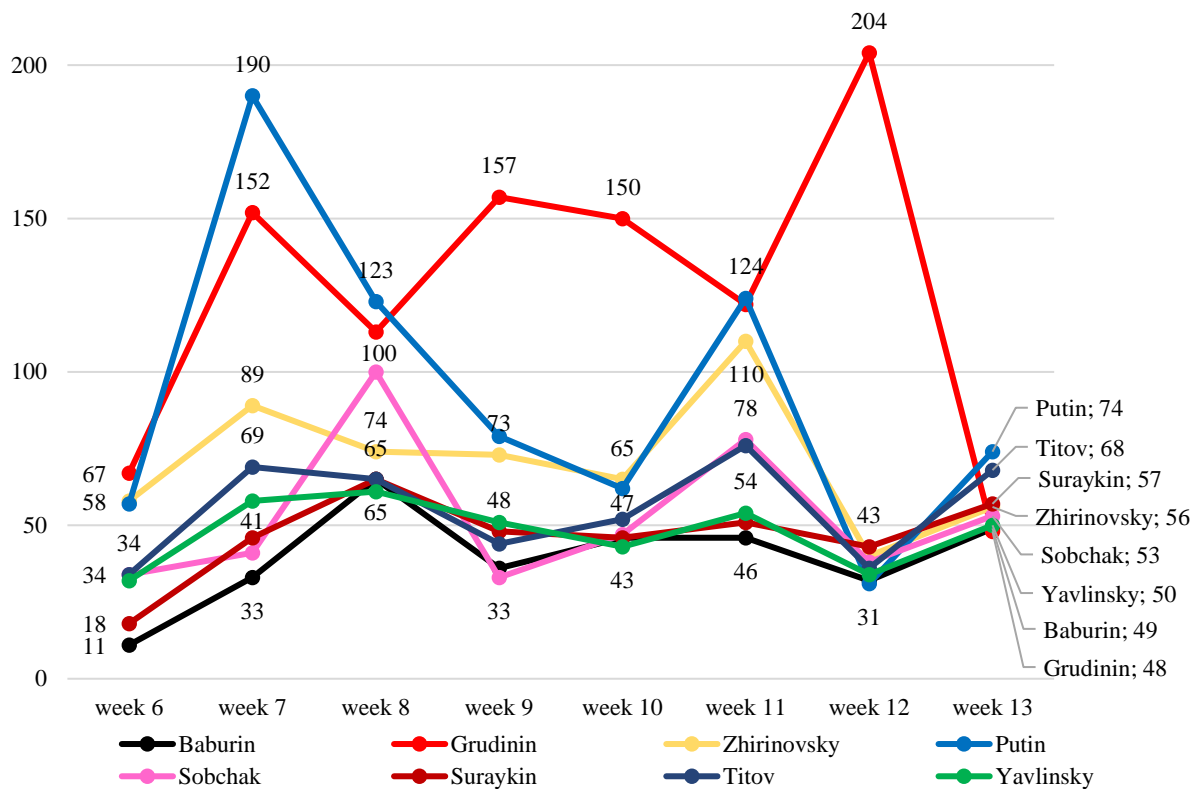


Fig. 4. Total number of presidential candidate mentions in the subjects of election-related programs, according to "Golos" monitoring data

However, the advantage that Pavel Grudinin had in terms of the sheer number of media mentions was caused primarily by negative references to his campaign. For example, during the 12th week of the campaign, almost 100% of the time allocated for elections news stories on the Ren-TV channel, which specializes in propaganda "investigations," was dedicated to negative mentions of Pavel Grudinin campaign.

The total time allocated to covering the activities of presidential candidates in election-related stories similarly demonstrates a much higher interest in Vladimir Putin and Pavel Grudinin than in all other candidates (Figure 5). On average, stories covering the Grudinin election campaign lasted 85 seconds, that of Putin 70 seconds. Lagging behind the leader by more than half the allotted time are Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (42 seconds) and Boris Titov (34 seconds).

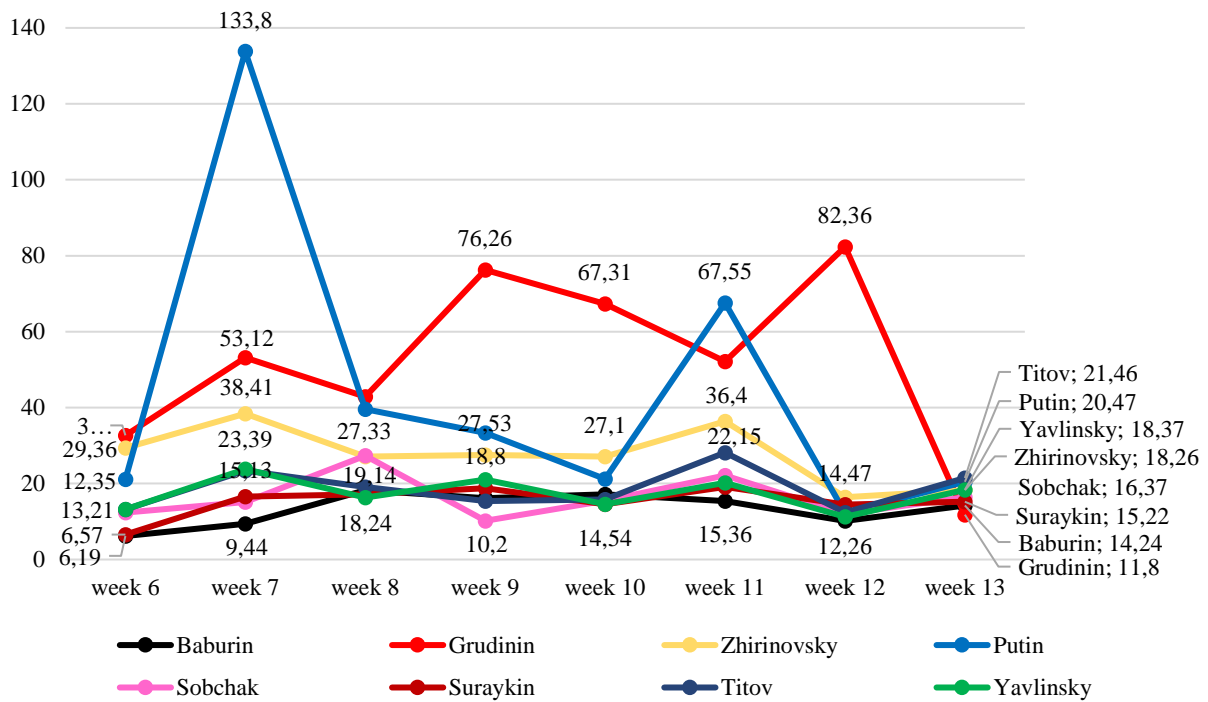


Fig. 5. Total amount of airtime allocated to presidential candidates (min, sec), according to “Golos” monitoring data

Media stories covering Putin were 18 times longer than stories covering Yavlinsky/Titov

As can be seen in Figure 6, the peak of interest in the election happened in the seventh week, when all five of the analyzed TV channels actively covered the meeting of Vladimir Putin with his representatives.

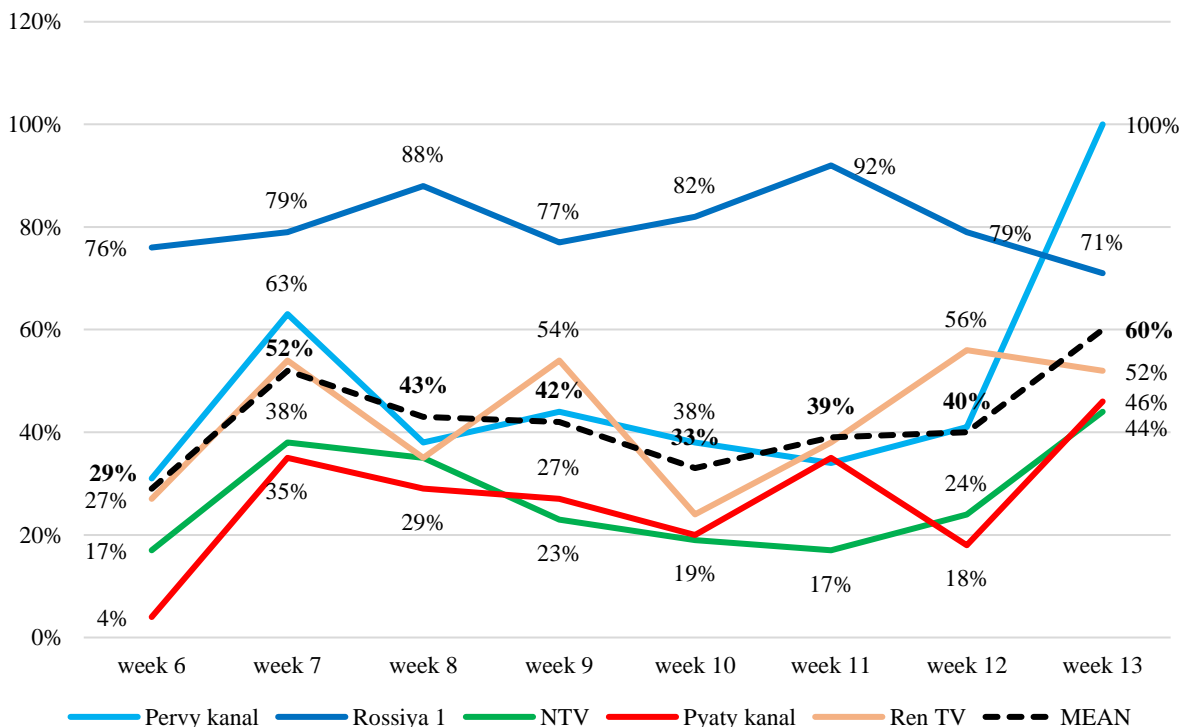


Fig. 6. Share of TV channel newscasts containing subjects about the election, according to "Golos" monitoring data

Over the next five weeks (weeks 8-12 of the election campaign), the interest of the TV channels in the election remained low, despite the approach of Election Day. From the 7th to the 10th week of the campaign, the share of newscasts containing news about the election fell by 19 percentage points – from 52% to 33%. Sociological studies have shown that, as a result, by the end of February the interest of citizens in the election was extremely low.

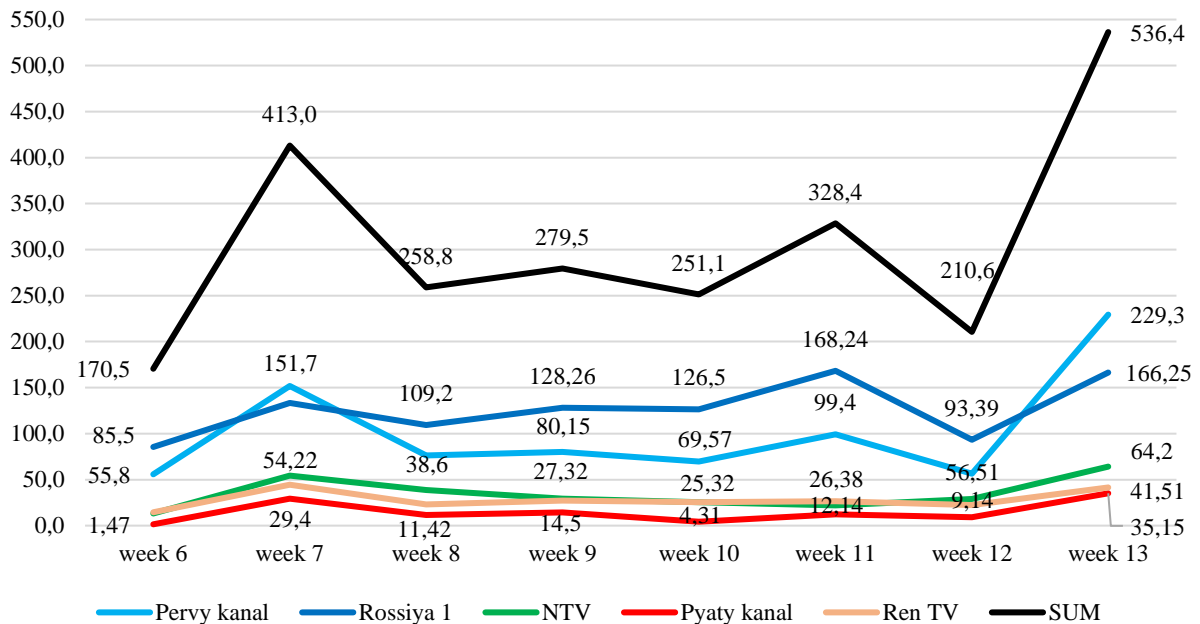


Fig. 7. Total duration of TV broadcasts on the election (in seconds), according to "Golos" monitoring data

More than half of the campaign broadcasts were provided by two TV channels—Russia 1 and Channel One (Figure 2). During all the weeks of monitoring, "Russia 1" remained the leader both in terms of the number of news about the election and the length of coverage. On average, 83% of the channel's news broadcasts included items about the election. Channel Five and Ren-TV showed the least activity in covering the election (Figure 8).

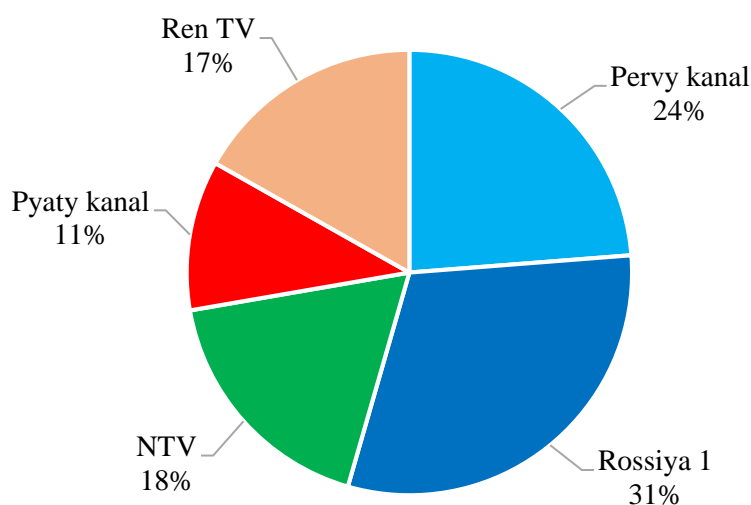


Figure 8. Share of TV channels in the total amount of airtime given to campaign information blocks, according to "Golos" monitoring data

During the election campaign, a paradoxical situation developed when the interest of the mainstream media towards the election did not increase as Election Day approached, and some of the central TV channels devoted only a few minutes a week to the election in their newscasts. At the same time, the occasional increase in attention to the election coincided with the activity of only one candidate – Vladimir Putin.

Inadequate informing of voters about the content side of the campaign, while giving a detailed coverage of the activities of the incumbent president, further increased the imbalance in granting the rights of all candidates.

The role of the debates in the election campaign

Russian law includes a paragraph on holding discussions, roundtables, and other joint campaigning events on TV channels, the format of which is chosen by the TV channels themselves (Paragraph 6 of Article 52 of the 19-FZ). On 14 February 2018, the CEC of Russia [adopted a resolution](#) approving the schedule for the distribution of free air time on the channels of all-Russian state organizations that broadcast television and/or radio debates between presidential candidates (Figure 9). It is curious that on the last day of campaigning, on Friday, 16 March, when it was natural to expect increased interest in the election, all the channels decided to refrain from holding "debates."

TV «debates» of the presidential candidates in Russia		Pervy Kanal	TVC	Rossiya 24	OTR	Rossiya 1
		08:05 – 08:57	17:00 – 17:50	19:05 – 19:50	21:05 – 21:50	23:15 – 00:15
		52 min	50 min	45 min	45 min	60 min
27 February	Tuesday					
28 February	Wednesday					
1 March	Thursday					
2 March	Friday					
3 March	Saturday					
4 March	Sunday					
5 March	Monday					
6 March	Tuesday					
7 March	Wednesday					
8 March	Thursday					
9 March	Friday					
10 March	Saturday					
11 March	Sunday					
12 March	Monday					
13 March	Tuesday					
14 March	Wednesday					
15 March	Thursday					
16 March	Friday					

Source: Decision of the CEC of the Russian Federation No. 141/1162-7, 14.02.2018

Fig. 9. Schedule of the election "debates"

As expected, the format of the election "debates" on state television channels caused protests from candidates. Pavel Grudinin, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, and Ksenia Sobchak demanded that

they be given the opportunity to directly debate with each other, one-on-one, live and in prime-time. On 5 March, an unsuccessful attempt was made to change the format during the meeting of candidates with the head of the Central Electoral Commission Ella Pamfilova. As a result, two candidates, the leader of the LDPR party (Vladimir Zhirinovskiy) and Ksenia Sobchak (the Civic Initiative party), [left the meeting](#) before its end, and Pavel Grudin in [refused personally to participate](#) in the debate.

The consequence of the chosen format for the "debate" was a series of public conflicts between candidates and their representatives on television and radio. For example, on 27 February, Ksenia Sobchak, after a number of obscenities from Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, poured water on him, and on 13 March, after a series of attacks by other candidates, Sobchak left the "debate" studio in tears. A few days before Election Day, candidate Maxim Suraykin and a representative of Pavel Grudin in (Maxim Shevchenko) almost got into a fight.

Characteristics of candidate media coverage

The tone of candidate mentions

The overall rating of the tone of reporting is shown in Fig. 10. It shows the difference between the proportion of positive and negative reports about the candidates.

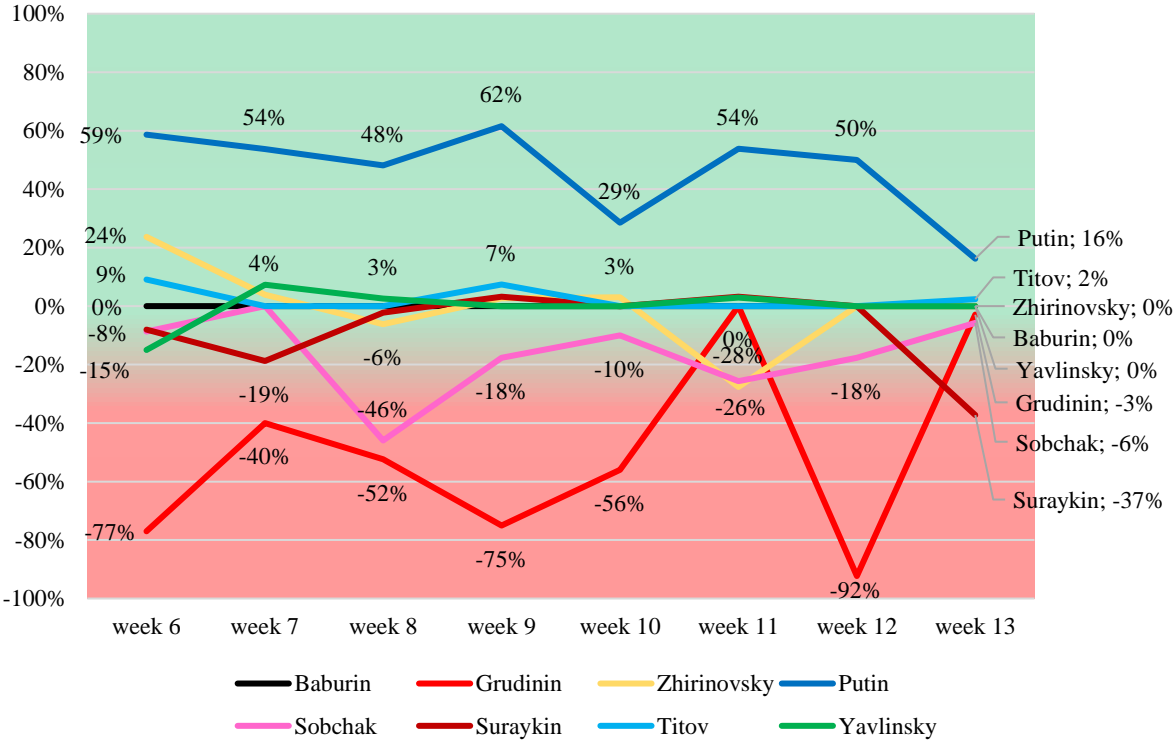


Fig. 10. Rating of the tone of reporting on presidential candidates, according to "Golos" monitoring data

Throughout all monitoring weeks, positive mentions dominate in Vladimir Putin’s coverage— in 46% of cases, Putin was mentioned in a positive light; there were no negative mentions, and 54% of the media references could be described as neutral. Pavel Grudin in, on the other hand, had a high proportion of negative mentions—55% of cases, with no positive mentions at all.

The quantitative predominance of information about the activities of Pavel Grudinin in election news is owing to the high proportion of negative reports about him. This is an outcome of the public discussion, which lasted throughout the campaign, regarding his foreign accounts, real estate holdings, involvement in the court case with the shareholders of the State Farm "Lenin," and other similar stories. Such news items were broadcast daily in prime time and their duration increased with the approach of Election day, which suggests that he was the subject of a planned and coordinated smear campaign.

As for the other candidates, their activities were portrayed neutrally, with only a short amount of time allotted to each.

Forming of candidate images in the media

During the election campaign, Vladimir Putin's activities were covered in accordance with the way authorized by his staff, while the image of his main opponents was deliberately destroyed. As a result, three approaches to the coverage of various candidates were formed in the media during the election campaign.

The first approach. Vladimir Putin is represented as the main and only real candidate, who enjoys popular support, is engaged in state affairs, is associated with a positive image of Russia's future, and is portrayed as the defender of the country.

The second approach. A group of candidates who constantly experience scandals: Pavel Grudinin, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, and Ksenia Sobchak.

The third group of candidates is present in the media only nominally. Those are Sergei Baburin, Maxim Suraykin, Boris Titov, and Grigory Yavlinsky. The media's attitude toward this quartet of candidates was more often than not pejorative.

In fact, the media set a certain "framework" through which the images of candidates should be perceived. At the same time, they acted according to uniform patterns, forming carnivalized, scandalous images of most candidates.

Coverage of candidates in regional media

The imbalance in media coverage of candidates is even more noticeable at the regional level. Vladimir Putin was widely depicted as the only candidate for the presidency; his name was mentioned in the regional media much more often than at the federal level (Figure 11). As a result, while at the federal level Vladimir Putin was ahead of the second place holder Ksenia Sobchak 7.9 times, at the regional level this difference reached a 10.5-fold gap.

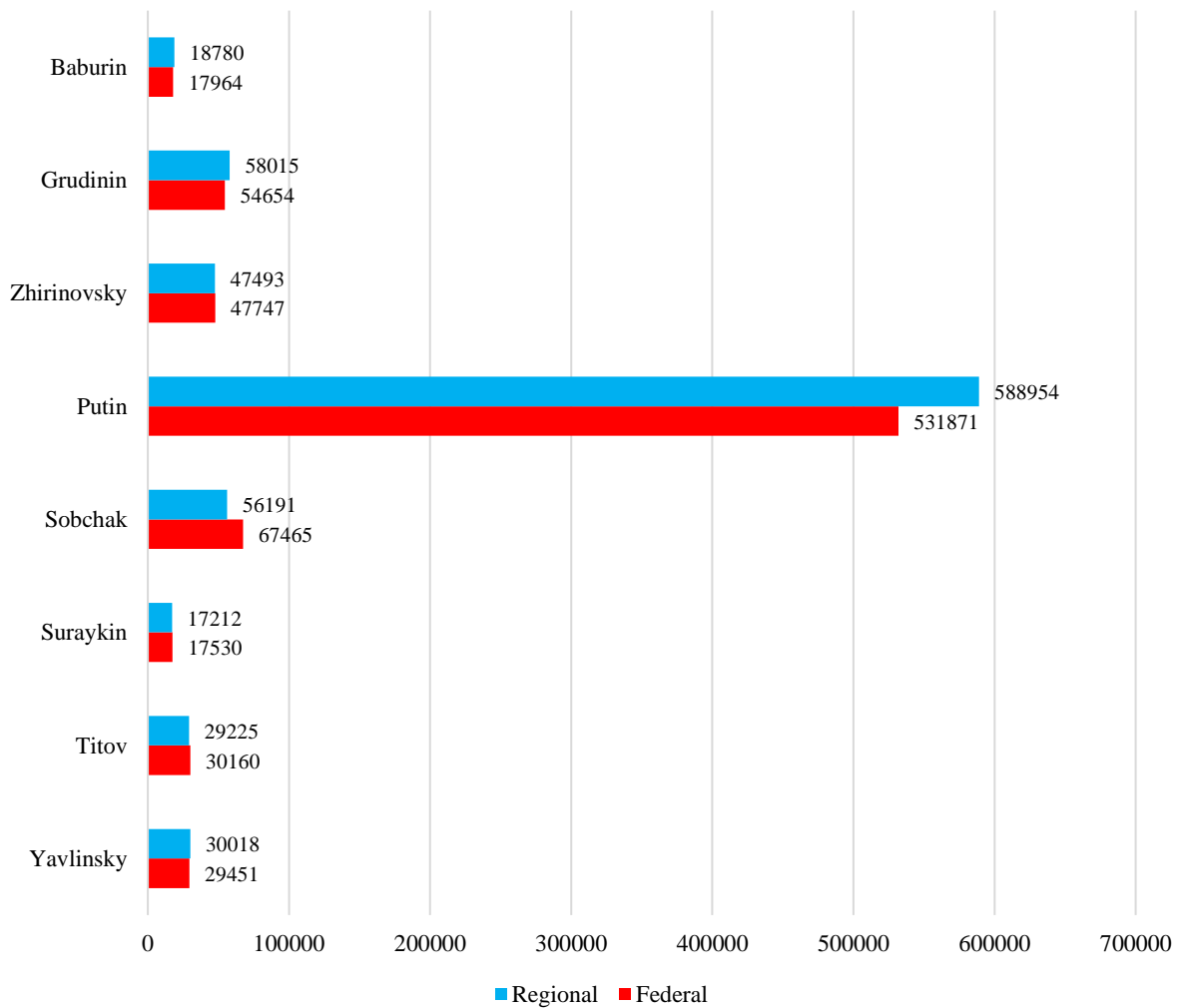


Fig. 11. Number of references to candidates in regional and federal mass media, according to the "Medialogy" system

There is a large amount of evidence about the centralized nature of the counter-campaign against Pavel Grudinin in state and municipal media. In addition to the federal TV channels, which throughout the campaign detailed the same scandals associated with Pavel Grudinin and his company (and provided hardly any coverage of his program), a wide network of state and municipal media in the regions was involved in working against him.

Networks of government-controlled media at all levels participated in manipulative coverage of the election campaign—they set a certain "framework" through which the images of candidates were to be perceived.

"Golos" received confirmation that this was a purposeful administrative action. Figure 12 is a screenshot of a message from the internal portal of the Administration of Communications of the Altai Territory, in which the head of the department Maxim Gerasimyuk offers editors of regional newspapers to post one of the two linked articles in their next issue.

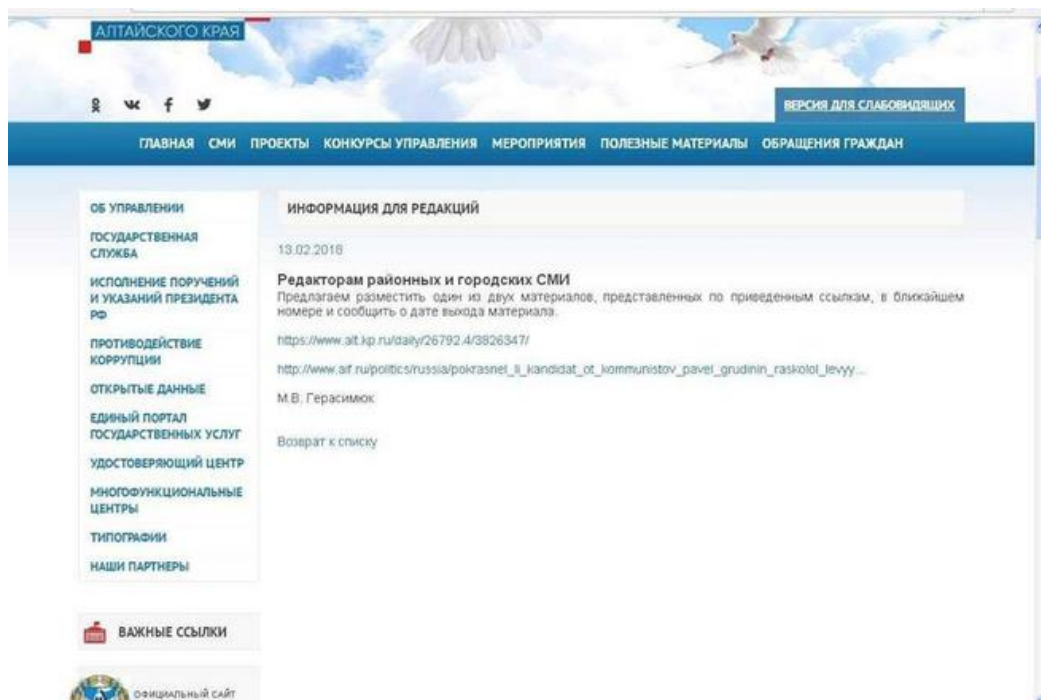


Figure. 12. Screenshot of the message from the internal portal of the Administration of Communications of the Altai Territory

Almost all municipal media of the Altai Territory that reprinted these articles have a common founder—the Administration of Communications of the Altai Territory. Reprints of the same articles appeared in other regions. They appeared in "[Evening Rostov](#)" (Rostov Region), "[Yuzhnouralets](#)" (Chebarkul, Chelyabinsk region), "[Mayak](#)" (Maloyaroslavets, Kaluga region), "[Center71](#)" (Tula region), "[Tuva's truth](#)" (Tyva), "[Zolotukhin's life](#)" (Zolotukhinsky district, Kursk region), and "Kamchatka News" (Kamchatka Territory). The same articles were massively reprinted, almost all in one day, in the regional newspapers of the Voronezh region. In the Kurgan region, the newspaper "Kurgan and Kurgan People" also published a number of negative articles on the representative of the Communist Party (Grudinin). Grudinin's representatives filed a complaint to the Election Commission based on this event, but it was rejected.

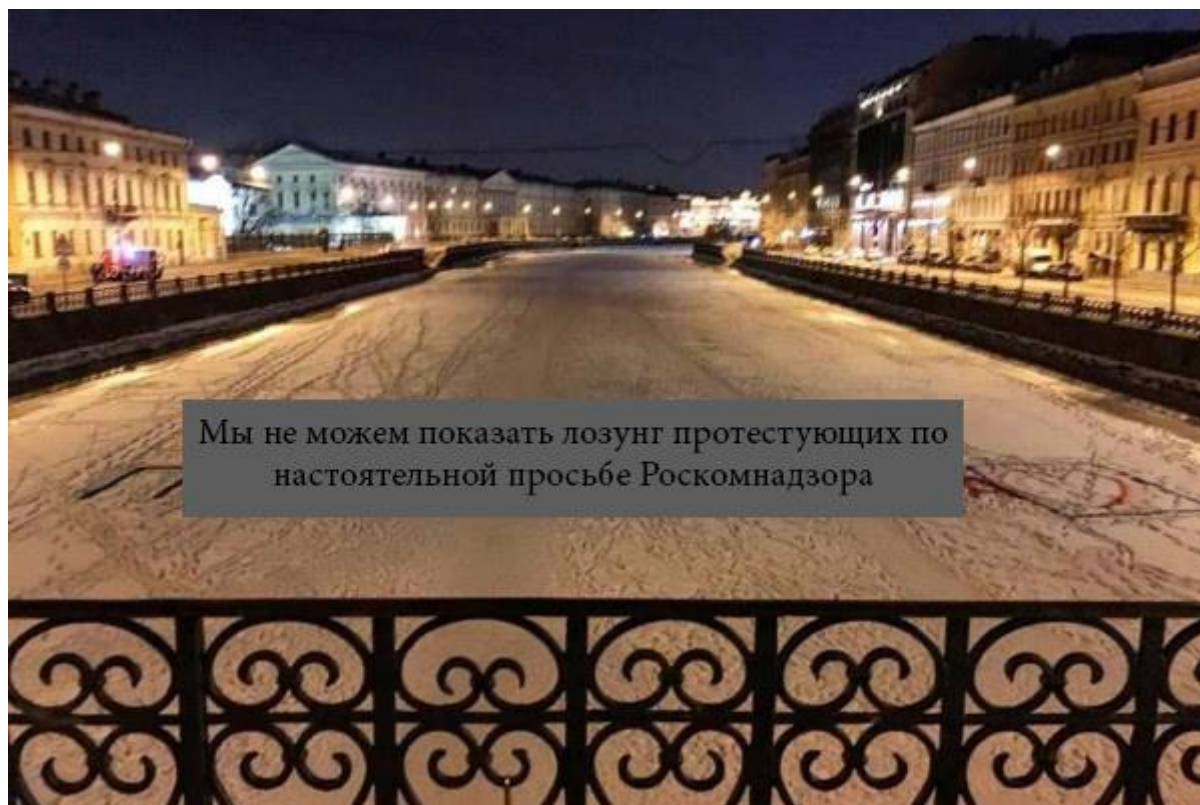
Effectiveness of information dispute resolutions

One of the traditional problems for Russian elections is the controversy regarding the difference between information and campaign materials published in the media.

During the campaign, there were frequent differences in approaches: in explicit campaigning materials in support of one candidate, the commissions and law enforcement agencies did not see a violation of the law, while at the same time they suppressed the dissemination of materials containing the slightest negative reference to the incumbent candidate, yet which were purely informative in nature.

A striking example of this was the pressure exerted by the North-Western department of Roskomnadzor on the publication "Business News Agency" («Агентство бизнес новостей»). Roskomnadzor demanded that the publication remove a photo showing volunteers of the headquarters of Ksenia Sobchak, who painted the slogan "Against Putin" on the ice of the Fontanka River in St. Petersburg. Although it is obvious that the publication did not pursue a

campaigning goal, Roskomnadzor employees announced to media representatives that the photo in which the inscription is visible can be regarded as illegal campaigning. As a result of this influence on the media by government officials, the “Business News Agency” complied with the demand and covered the "Against Putin" inscription with the comment "We cannot show the protest slogan at the urgent request of Roskomnadzor" (Picture 13). Photos were deleted by other Petersburg publications as well – Rosbalt and Delovoy Petersburg.



Picture 13. Photo from the "Business News Agency" website

By contrast, the CEC of Russia did not see evidence of campaigning for Vladimir Putin in any of the 55 videos that were reported by mid-January on the "Map of Violations" of the “Golos” movement.

Working groups on information disputes, which were formed under the CEC of Russia, and the election commissions of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation, were called upon to help resolve difficult disputes that require the separation of information materials from campaigning.

On 28 December 2017, the CEC of Russia formed a working group on information disputes and other issues of information support for elections during the campaign for the election of the Russian president. The Group, along with members of the CEC of Russia and its staff, [included](#) 14 representatives of the media, five employees of federal bodies of state power, ten scientists, specialists, and representatives of public organizations.

The expert potential of the working group turned out not to be aimed at a real analysis of contentious materials, but at allowing the CEC of Russia to partially escape a public responsibility for its decisions.

For example, on 24 January, at the working group’s first [meeting](#), one of the issues addressed was a complaint filed by the candidate Ksenia Sobchak, based on the analysis of the news broadcasts of television channels carried out by the “Golos” movement. 55 broadcasts were

mentioned in the complaint, containing signs of election campaigning for candidate Vladimir Putin during the collection of signatures. At the meeting, a certificate of the legal department of the CEC of Russia was distributed to the attendees, in which only 9 of the 55 controversial subjects were considered. As a result, the members of the working group at the meeting watched only one of the 55 contested videos. At the end of the meeting, based on information and testimony provided by the participants, including representatives of TV channels—who were also members of the working group and thus parties to the dispute—the members of the group decided there was no illegal propaganda in the videos, without having seen all of them.

The lack of initiative to resolve disputes is even more visible at the regional level, and is reflected in the composition of the working groups established under the election commissions of the subjects of the Russian Federation. "Golos" analyzed the composition of such working groups of 82 regional election commissions. **The analysis revealed that about 60% of working groups of regional election commissions consist only of representatives of regional election commissions, representatives of Roskomnadzor, and regional government officials, which underlines the internal and technical nature of the working groups.**

Expert group working on the report:

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