
WORKING PAPER

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Political Cycles in Media Harassment

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This paper explores the political economy of media harassment in Russia. We use a unique monthly dataset on the incidents of media harassment in Russian cities between 2004 and 2017 to establish real political cycles driven by local elections. We find that harassment incidents are 54% more likely to occur during the two months before a local election - a period that coincides with the official period of the electoral campaign. The effect differs with respect to the type of local election: more important elections produce bigger cycles.

KEYWORDS

Free press, Elections, Political Cycles, Russia

1 | INTRODUCTION

The role of independent media in holding elected politicians accountable has been long recognized in the literature (e.g. Brunetti and Weder 2003; Ferraz and Finan 2008; Whitten-Woodring 2009; Stanig 2015).¹ Yet, this very ability to act as a watchdog makes independent media a target of intimidation and harassment from the elites in power. The current trend of a decline in press freedom makes media harassment especially an urgent concern, but it has only recently started to attract the attention of the research community.² The recent literature has looked mostly at the correlation between socio-economic conditions and press freedom. Brambila (2017) provides empirical evidence that killings of journalists in Mexico happen more often in areas with higher social violence, internal conflict and low economic and institutional development. A study of media freedom in presidential democracies in Latin America by Kellam and Stein (2016) finds that presidents who are relatively unconstrained by the legislative and judiciary tend to pressure free media more often. Solis and Antenangeli (2017) suggest that more corrupt governments are more motivated to censor the press. Corruption has been found to be a main determinant of journalist killings by Bjørnskov and Freytag (2016).

¹We use "independent media" and "free press" interchangeably.

²The dynamics of the state of free press in the world are summarized in annual reports by Freedom House: see more on the official website <https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world>

According to the paper by Egorov et al. (2009), oil rents are associated positively with media capture. Von Doepf and Young (2013) look at media harassment in Sub-Saharan Africa and find that its increase coincides with political protests, internal conflicts and constitutional reforms.

Our study seeks to contribute to the understanding of what drives attacks on the media by looking at the political cycles produced by upcoming elections. Elections are a special time for politicians when they face a challenge to their power and are therefore motivated to repress the critical media. (Von Doepf and Young 2013).

We test this hypothesis within one big country that has been well known for mistreating the press – Russia.³ The country holds local elections that are exogenously and asynchronously timed. Using a new monthly dataset on the harassment of journalists across Russian cities over the last 14 years, we provide strong empirical evidence for the existence of political cycles in media harassment.

These media harassment cycles are substantial with an increase of more than 54% in the likelihood that media harassment takes place before an election. At the same time, they are short-lived and last only two months before the election, a period that coincides with the duration of the official electoral campaigns. When we differentiate between the election types, we find that the elections of regional governors and city mayors produce the strongest cycles since these elections provide access to an executive position with centralized political power. In contrast, winning elections in the regional parliament is less lucrative since the political power is inverse to the number of parliamentarians and limited mostly to legislative activity at the regional level. Yet, we find that elections for the regional parliaments also cause sizable increases in media harassment in the two months before the election. While regional legislative power still offers political rents, city parliaments are probably the least important institutions in Russia: their decision power is limited to some local public goods, such as garbage collection, and most of their decisions can be overruled by the mayor. Therefore, we are not surprised to find that the elections for the city parliaments do not generate political cycles in media harassment. Another interesting observation arises when we differentiate between the cities with the status of a regional capital and non-capital cities. We find that regional elections produce media harassment only in capitals of the region, but the cycles produced by the mayoral elections are present in both types of cities.

This article also contributes to the literature on political cycles that has recently extended beyond budget cycles (e.g. Brender and Drazen 2005; Shi and Svensson 2006), covering for example electoral violence (Harish and Little 2017) or corruption (Sidorkin and Vorobyev 2018). Additionally, our research provides insight into the political economy of media freedom in Russia.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 explains the data and the estimation strategy, Section 3 presents the main results and results for the disaggregated elections and Section 4 concludes.

2 | DATA

We analyze the relationship between incidents of media harassment in Russia and local elections at the city level. Moscow and St. Petersburg are omitted as the media located in these cities are heavily involved in national politics. We only consider cities with a population of more than 100,000 inhabitants, which leaves us with a total of 163 cities across 77 Russian regions.⁴

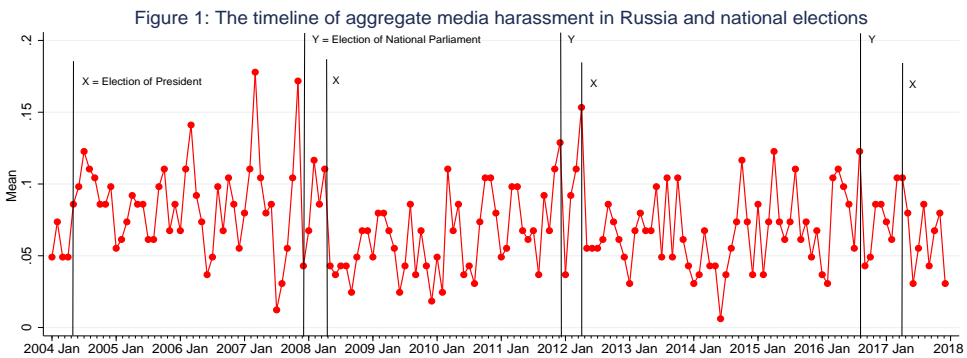
³For more information see the report on Russia by Journalists Without Borders: website <https://rsf.org/en/russia>

⁴We do not expect smaller towns to have many journalists, if any at all.

2.1 | Data on media harassment

The data on harassment of journalists are taken from the "Media Conflicts in Russia" database, which was constructed by the non-governmental organization Glasnost Defense Foundation (GDF), dedicated to protect journalists and media outlets from state pressure and violence. The database was launched in 2004 as a systematic attempt to provide full monitoring of journalists' rights across the country and has been continuously updated by the GDF members and their regional network of journalists.

The dataset includes 1967 incidents of media harassment registered between 2004 and 2017. According to the GDF classification, there are several types of harassment: death of a journalist (1% of the incidents), physical violence against journalists (28%), threat of violence (14%), arrests by the police (22%), legal prosecution (19%), censorship (29%) and illegal dismissal (5%). Each entry contains a brief description of the incident, its date and location (city). The occurrence of media harassment is widespread; only for 15 of the 163 cities, no incident was reported. Figure 1 illustrates the time pattern of media harassment incidents: it measures a share of cities with at least one incident per month. Interestingly, while there is no obvious trend in media harassment over 14 years in Figure 1, we can notice that generally incidents build up and peak close to the presidential and national parliamentary elections.



We construct our outcome variable for the presence of media harassment in a city i in a month t as a dummy that equals one when harassment is registered in the GDF database and zero otherwise. The dummy measure is our preferred form of the dependent variable because it is impossible to compare the severity of the media harassment across types and, more importantly, within the same category of harassment. Even two cases of physical violence can be of different severity, and we therefore assume that the main heterogeneity comes from the absence or presence of harassment in a first place. The monthly frequency of data is important in detecting the political cycles in Russia as they tend to be relatively short-lived as suggested by Akhmedov and Zhuravskaya (2004).

The binary outcome variable is then estimated by logistic regression. Its asymptotic properties with respect to a big number of observations allows us to dismiss the potential problems of having many zero observations.⁵

2.2 | Elections

Local elections are very common in Russia. Our sample shows that every year, about 80 cities hold local elections. There are two types of elections at the city level: elections for the mayor (262 cities held this type of elections in our sample, $N=262$) and elections of the city parliament ($N=455$); they are held with an interval of four to six years, depending on local regulations. The elections do not take place simultaneously in all cities, their exact date is announced at least one

⁵About 1,616 of observations or 6% have a value of 1 opposed to 25,768 observations with a value of 0.

year in advance.

The elections of the city parliament have been held regularly; mayoral elections have been sometimes replaced by a system of appointments if a city is governed by a city-manager appointed by the governor. In our sample, we have cities that had mayoral elections consistently every four or five years, cities that had only the system of appointed city-managers, cities that introduced this type of elections after having appointed a city-manager and cities that opted out of elections at some point of time. The previous literature has not provided a clear explanation what makes a city change its system of governance, and we attribute those shifts to the idiosyncratic development in local politics.

The other two types of local elections that we study are held at the regional level: elections of the governor of the region (N=188) and elections for the regional parliaments (N=475). Similar to the elections at the city level, their timing is asynchronous. Parliamentary elections are regular and take place every five years, whereas gubernatorial elections were only reintroduced in 2012, replacing a system, in which the governors were appointed by the president. Gubernatorial elections adopted the timing that was set for the re-appointment of the governor, which was scheduled for all regions with an interval of five years, and we therefore assume that there is no endogeneity in electoral timing.

3 | EMPIRICAL RESULTS

3.1 | Media Harassment Cycles

We estimate the effect of a local election on media harassments disregarding the election type but including the time lags both for upcoming and recent elections.

$$\begin{aligned} Harassment_{ti} = & \alpha + \beta_1 Election_{(t+3)i} + \beta_2 Election_{(t+2)i} + \beta_3 Election_{(t+1)i} + \beta_4 Election_{ti} + \dots \\ & \dots + \beta_5 Election_{(t-1)i} + \beta_6 Election_{(t-2)i} + \beta_7 Election_{(t-3)i} + \eta_i + \tau_t + \varepsilon_{ti} \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

where *Harassment* is a dummy variable indicating the presence of media harassment in city *i* and month *t*; *Election* is a dummy for having any local election being held during the month; η_i is a vector of city fixed effects; τ_t are time fixed effects to deal with seasonality and common trends and ε_{ti} is the error term.

Table 1 reports the main estimation results of the logistic regression. The coefficients report the odd ratios (OR) and in our case tell a factor by which the odds of the harassment to occur increase with respect to exposure to the elections. OR below one indicate a negative likelihood of harassment occurrence. The basic model in column (1) shows that media harassment is more likely to happen one month before the election and during the election month. The effect is sizable: on average harassment incidents are 1.5-1.6 times more likely before the election than in any other month.

This result suggests that media harassment cycles are short-lived and last for about two months. This duration might be predetermined by the regulation for official electoral campaigns that restricts local electoral campaigns to be initiated earlier than 70 days before an election.

Splitting the sample into cities with the status of a regional capital and non-capital cities in columns (2-3) does not change the results: there is no statistical difference between the reported coefficients.

Since we are able to differentiate between the types of media harassment as shown in Section 2, we construct separate measures for incidents of media harassment of violent nature and for non-violent incidents. We classify death of journalists, physical violence or the threat of such violence as violent harassment and the rest of incidents as non-violent harassment. The dependent variables for both types is a dummy that equals one if a particular type of harassment takes place. The regression results are reported in columns (4) and (5). The coefficients are quantitatively not different from the baseline estimation with both types of harassment increasing significantly in their likelihood

shortly before the election and then returning to normal levels after the election.

Table 1: Media harassment cycles, estimation with lags

Dep. variable Sample	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Harassment All Cities	Harassment Capitals	Harassment Non Capitals	Violent All Cities	Non-Violent All Cities
Election, 3 months before	1.16 (1.50)	1.22* (1.77)	0.98 (-0.09)	1.15 (0.78)	1.15 (0.97)
Election, 2 months before	1.13 (1.04)	1.15 (1.03)	1.00 (0.01)	1.27 (1.43)	1.05 (0.33)
Election, 1 months before	1.49*** (4.07)	1.43*** (2.94)	1.81*** (3.45)	1.36** (2.10)	1.45*** (3.07)
Election in a current month	1.62*** (5.56)	1.67*** (4.90)	1.62** (2.34)	1.57*** (3.59)	1.60*** (4.42)
Election, 1 months after	1.02 (0.21)	0.99 (-0.10)	1.17 (0.84)	1.13 (0.72)	1.01 (0.06)
Election, 2 months after	0.89 (-1.01)	0.82 (-1.56)	1.15 (0.51)	0.82 (-1.22)	0.89 (-0.86)
Election, 3 months after	0.91 (-0.81)	0.99 (-0.11)	0.49** (-2.39)	1.19 (1.10)	0.70** (-2.05)
City FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	27384	11857	13156	26406	27384

Notes: coefficients are odd-ratios; estimation with clustered SE; t statistics in parentheses; * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

3.2 | Disaggregating Elections by Type

As the assumption that all local elections have the same effect on media harassment cycles may not be justified, we investigate which elections matter more. For that reason, we construct four dummy variables - each for every type of election - that equals one if the respective election is being held in the next or in the current month.

The results are presented in Table 2. Column (1) shows that elections of mayors or governors produce the most substantial cycles of media harassment: the odds of media harassment registered in one of the two months are 1.92 and 2.03 times larger than in any other month. A little smaller but still significant effect is produced by the elections of the regional parliaments; here, the odds are 1.65 times higher. In contrast, elections of the city parliament have no statistically significant effect. This heterogeneity in the effects of different types of elections can be determined by the political rents that originate from winning different types of elections. Any election for a position (governor or mayor) that grants administrative resources almost exclusively to one person creates large rents and thus create larger cycles than elections to shared political institutions (parliament). At the same time, the political power at the regional level is still separated into an executive and a legislative branch, and regional parliaments have the monopoly on regional legislative power while governors hold executive positions. Finally, winning elections for city parliaments does not grant much political power since the city parliament has no legislative power comparable to the regional parliament and since most of its decisions are exclusively focused on local public goods and can be often overruled by the mayor.

Table 2: Disaggregating elections by type, logistic regression with clustered SE

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Harassment	Violent All cities	Non-Violent	Harassment Capitals	Harassment Non-Capitals
Governor election	2.05*** (3.52)	1.76* (1.84)	2.08*** (2.68)	1.83** (2.52)	1.81 (1.25)
Mayor election	1.95*** (3.87)	1.91*** (2.73)	1.98*** (3.40)	1.81** (2.51)	3.49*** (4.61)
Regional Duma election	1.65*** (3.54)	1.87*** (3.76)	1.46** (2.15)	2.07*** (4.93)	0.65 (-1.02)
City council election	1.08 (0.56)	0.88 (-0.61)	1.11 (0.59)	0.98 (-0.12)	1.33 (0.89)
Observations	27221	26243	27221	11786	13064

Note: t statistics in parentheses * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Similar to Table 1, we look at how effects differ in a sample of capital cities and a sample of non-capital cities. While we observe that the effect of elections in capital cities is similar to their effect in the full sample (column 1), column (3) shows that mayoral elections are the sole source of media harassment cycles in non-capital cities. However, this difference is most likely determined by the type of media that reports about regional politicians since the media in the capitals dominates regional topics including politics, whereas the media in non-capital cities has to take the niche of local journalism. Columns 4 and 5 present the results for violent and non-violent types of media harassment, which do not differ significantly from the main results.

4 | CONCLUSION

This study looks at media harassment across Russian cities and finds evidence for the existence of political cycles at the city level. The cycles appear two months before the election, which is normally the period of the electoral campaign in Russia. The data shows that journalists and the media are harassed 1.5 times more likely in the months before the elections, and there is a slightly significant decline in the likelihood of such incidents right after the elections. The political cycles equally exist for violent and non-violent harassment. When we disaggregate elections by type, we find that elections associated with more political power tend to generate bigger cycles: the odds for the incidents of harassment to be present in the months before the elections are 1.9 and 2 times higher for elections of the city mayor and the regional governor, respectively. Elections of the regional parliament, which is the main legislative authority in a region, have a 1.7 times higher likelihood of media harassment in the preceding months. Elections of the city parliament, which is less important in terms of political weight, and interest from the local press have no significant effect. We also find that regional elections matter for media harassment cycles only in the capital of a region since politics at the regional level are solely discussed by the media located in the capital.

Note: Appendix A contains several planned extensions that could be allocated in the analysis in the future.

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5 | APPENDIX A: FUTURE ADDITIONAL TESTS

Table A1 tests whether timing of elections that were replaced by appointment system has an influence on media harassment. This test applies only to elections of the city mayor and the regional governor. Columns 1-3 suggest that the timing by itself does not cause harassment cycles. The timing of actual appointment is relatively different from the timing in electoral system and, therefore, one can expect that such political events might also change our main results. Columns 4-6 show that it is not the case in our data.

Table 1A: Placebo elections and appointments of mayors and governors

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Harassment	Violent	Non-Violent	Harassment	Violent	Non-Violent
Governor election	2.05*** (3.52)	1.75* (1.83)	2.08*** (2.68)	2.05*** (3.52)	1.76* (1.84)	2.08*** (2.68)
Governor election (placebo)	0.76 (-0.78)	0.53 (-1.15)	0.87 (-0.31)			
Governor appointment				0.41 (-1.46)	0.54 (-0.80)	0.26 (-1.39)
Mayor election	1.93*** (3.78)	1.88*** (2.64)	1.96*** (3.33)	1.93*** (3.79)	1.88*** (2.64)	1.97*** (3.37)
Mayor election (placebo)	1.53 (1.64)	1.57 (1.21)	1.39 (0.91)			
Mayor appointment				1.57 (1.25)	2.14 (1.55)	1.01 (0.01)
Regional Duma election	1.66*** (3.55)	1.87*** (3.76)	1.47** (2.16)	1.65*** (3.53)	1.87*** (3.75)	1.46** (2.14)
City council election	1.08 (0.51)	0.87 (-0.64)	1.10 (0.55)	1.08 (0.55)	0.87 (-0.63)	1.12 (0.61)
Observations	27221	26243	27221	27221	26243	27221

Note: t statistics in parentheses * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

According to Egorov et al. (2009) media freedom can depend on the availability of natural resources and we would expect the presence of oil in the region (measured as a dummy that equals one if region has an oil extracting industry) to interact negatively with the electoral cycle. We investigate this hypothesis in Table A2. Interaction terms do not seem to generate a clear pattern. The coefficients reach statistical significance only in capital and non-capital sub-samples: in capitals of oil extracting regions harassment of journalists is lower around the elections; in non-capital cities elections of mayors tend to be associated with more harassment if the city is located in oil-rich region.

Table A2: Political cycles and natural resources

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Harassment	Violent All cities	Non-Violent	Harassment Capitals	Harassment Non-Capitals
Governor election	2.22*** (3.61)	1.95** (2.02)	2.24*** (2.80)	2.21*** (3.08)	1.37 (0.61)
Governor election x Oil	0.64 (-0.97)	0.55 (-0.85)	0.64 (-0.71)	0.33** (-2.01)	3.16 (1.34)
Mayor election	1.75*** (2.76)	1.79** (2.25)	1.81*** (2.58)	1.65* (1.83)	2.87*** (3.16)
Mayor election x Oil	1.79 (1.61)	1.34 (0.50)	1.68 (1.15)	1.66 (0.99)	2.81* (1.71)
Regional Duma election	1.66*** (3.01)	1.99*** (3.43)	1.40 (1.59)	2.08*** (4.24)	0.67 (-0.83)
Regional Duma election x Oil	1.01 (0.02)	0.75 (-0.72)	1.34 (0.67)	1.02 (0.04)	0.90 (-0.15)
City council election	1.21 (1.17)	0.86 (-0.61)	1.30 (1.35)	0.99 (-0.07)	1.74 (1.57)
City council election x Oil	0.56 (-1.55)	1.05 (0.09)	0.39* (-1.80)	0.89 (-0.31)	0.24* (-1.74)
Observations	27221	26243	27221	11786	13064

Note: t statistics in parentheses * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Finally, we consider events that might distract attention of public from local elections. Such events in our case are Olympic games and Football World Cup Championships. Our hypothesis is that during the sport events the threat of critical publications is lower since general public pays less attention to the electoral process and, thus, local elite need to invest less in media harassment. We compose a dummy variable that equals 1 if the sport event is taking place during that month. The results are reported in Table A3. Competing news generated by sport events seem to lower the odds of media harassment on average, how the effect is not significant for the interaction term.

Table A3: Political cycles and competing news

	(1) Harassment	(2) Violent All cities	(3) Non-Violent	(4) Harassment Capitals	(5) Harassment Non-Capitals
Sports	0.82* (-1.92)	0.58*** (-3.18)	0.96 (-0.34)	0.83 (-1.55)	0.76 (-1.11)
Governor election	1.80** (2.56)	1.28 (0.71)	1.99** (2.53)	1.66* (1.88)	1.67 (1.00)
Governor election x Sports	1.05 (0.11)	2.33 (1.34)	0.67 (-0.63)	0.94 (-0.11)	0.88 (-0.11)
Mayor election	1.87*** (3.02)	1.63* (1.81)	2.12*** (3.09)	1.68* (1.90)	3.64*** (3.66)
Mayor election x Sports	1.20 (0.52)	1.49 (0.68)	0.90 (-0.25)	1.37 (0.71)	0.81 (-0.29)
Regional Duma election	1.65*** (3.38)	1.50** (2.14)	1.65*** (2.66)	2.01*** (4.18)	0.90 (-0.26)
Regional Duma election x Sports	1.12 (0.42)	1.63 (1.24)	0.87 (-0.43)	1.11 (0.35)	0.63 (-0.59)
City council election	1.01 (0.06)	0.89 (-0.48)	1.00 (0.00)	0.96 (-0.19)	1.05 (0.12)
City council election x Sports	1.34 (0.89)	0.99 (-0.03)	1.56 (1.16)	1.12 (0.29)	2.43 (1.32)
Observations	27221	27221	27221	11857	15364

Note: t statistics in parentheses * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$