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“No mighty King, no ambitious Emperor, no Pope, no prophet ever dreamed of such an awesome pulpit, such a magic wand.” This statement by Fred Friendly of Columbia Broadcasting System uttered to describe the American television in the 1960’s rings true in contemporary Russia, whose leaders reap the benefits of television’s dominance as the source of information for some 90% of the population. How is political power gained and maintained in the context of such high trust in television? With Vladimir Putin having allegedly “come back” onto the world stage, an insight into the operational logic and tactics of his regime presented by Tina Burrett deserves a special welcome.

Burrett reminds us that the Russian media are not independent and should not be expected to function as watchdogs over the activities of public officials. But instead of airing frustrations about them not functioning similarly to the media in advanced democracies, she encourages scholars to analyze how the political regime uses the media, not where the Russian model falls short of models practiced elsewhere. She maps out the relationship of the Russian president and national television during his first two terms in office, focusing on key political events (elections and public relations crises) and tracing the routes through which power was exercised to establish and preserve Putin’s political order -- setting political elites against each other, permitting some pluralism, all leading to the president’s strategic advantage. Only after a series of strategic moves on part of the executive branch has television occupied a central place in the configuration of Russian political power, notes Burrett.

Like other books on Russian politics and media, this monograph relates a story of media ownership shifting from the state to the private hands in the 1990’s, a development celebrated as a sign of democratic freedoms taking root in Russia, only to be reversed when Vladimir Putin came to power. Unlike other books on this topic, it pays attention not only to who owns what but also to editorial practices and penchants, revealing the tensions between commercial and political motives of Russian media magnates. Concentrating on Moscow and the national television programs exclusively, the author correctly assumes that the regional media in Russia are unlikely to be more independent or more critical of the government.

Chapter 1 frames the book theoretically as the study of symbolic power and of the attempts to accumulate symbolic capital (such as reputation and prestige) that lends legitimacy to the political order. To get things done in Russia, television – the major medium through which Russian leaders communicate with the public and the major terrain on which they earn symbolic capital – has to be controlled; Burrett explains Vladimir Putin’s rationale for dealing with the media. Chapter 2 describes the strategies deployed in constructing Putin’s presidential persona in the campaign of 2000. In addition to the emphasis on toughness, Burrett documents the length of coverage and its positive tone that together made candidate Putin a favorite in the race. The
resulting electoral victory boosted the elites’ confidence in the media as kingmakers. Yet, as Chapter 3 shows, Russian oligarchs soon found out that the Kremlin had other views on what and how should be covered. As the sinking of the Kursk submarine made clear, the media criticism of the government’s actions – in this case, their hesitance to accept international rescue assistance – was no longer permitted.

Control over the plurality of views and agenda setting became a touchstone for presidential communication. Comparing presidential speeches, the transcripts of television news programs, and public opinion data, Burrett finds no single, uniform agenda in them. Her analysis also discovers that sensationalism in the news is not very welcomed by the Russian audience. However, adding a little excitement to the political news is not a foreign strategy either, according to Chapter 5, which detects it in the coverage of Duma election of 2003, the coverage of oppositional parties, and that of the arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, chairman of Russia’s largest oil company and the Kremlin’s vocal critic. The subsequent chapters replicate the analysis for the election of 2004 and the coverage of the public relation mishaps such as Beslan school siege and street protests against the benefits reform. At the end of Putin’s second term in office, concludes Burrett, the diversity of opinion on the national TV became a shadow of what it used to be in 2000. Television broadcasters were “tamed” for now, but the centralized control over television news bred concerns about the sustainability of this system beyond Putin’s reign.

The book’s conclusion confirms the established view that the current political regime in Russia is not comfortable with multiple centers of power and organizes it in the infamous hierarchy labelled “a vertical of power.” Exploring the vertical in action, the book attends – as it promises to in the opening pages – only to the agenda control during elections and public relations crises. Understandably, such events are harder to miss. Unfortunately, control is not lifted past the election day and power over the media is exercised daily. The routine operations of the regime are more elusive, but, to emphasize, they are more telling of how things are really done. With the campaign communication practices and the agenda control laid out by Burrett’s book, the task now is for others to uncover how political power is managed on a daily basis, what kind of media consumption it invites, and what kind of audience it raises in the process, telling us what is specifically Russian about the symbolic power gained via television and what lesson it offers on the conversion of such power into political one. Students of Russian politics and media will find this book a helpful reference when studying post-communist political regimes and their communication repertoires.