

## **U.S. TV Coverage of Post-Communist Countries: Politics and Virtual Reality**

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyzes the coverage of post-communist countries, particularly their politics, by major television networks in the United States. The question is whether there are significant differences in representation of East Central European and post-Soviet countries on U.S. television. The related question is whether political factors, such as relations with the United States and national phobias, affect the television coverage of various East Central European and post-Soviet countries. This study uses quantitative and content analyses of transcripts of news programs from the most watched U.S. TV networks: ABC, CBS, and NBC in 2004-2008. A keyword search of transcripts in the Lexis-Nexis database is employed to identify specific programs and news stories that focused on these post-Communist countries. The analysis shows significant differences in quantity, content, and quality of American television coverage of East Central European and post-Soviet countries. Such political events as the war between Georgia and Russia over South Ossetia, major terrorist acts in Russia, the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko (a former Russian secret service employee) in London, the poisoning of Viktor Yushchenko (the future president of Ukraine), the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine, and the deployment of the US missile system in Poland and the Czech Republic, were among top stories dealing with the post-communist countries. The study presents results of the analysis concerning the effect of such political factors as relations of countries with the United States and national phobias on U.S. TV coverage of East Central European and post-Soviet countries.

## Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study analyzes the coverage of post-communist countries, specifically their politics, by main television networks in the United States. It compares the extent and the content of reporting about major post-communist states, such as Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. The research question is whether there are significant differences in the extent and quality of coverage of former communist states on main television news programs in the United States. The related question is whether political factors, such as relations with the United States and national phobias, affect the American television coverage of these countries.

The analysis of the coverage of post-communist nations by US TV networks is important not only from a perspective of political communications but also from a perspective of comparative politics and foreign policy. International images of their country, in particular, in Western mass media, became an important political concern in many post-communist states. Previous studies show that television coverage affects American public attitudes and US foreign policy agenda towards other countries (Norris, 2000; Semetko, Brzinski, Weaver and Willnat, 1992; Wanta, Golan, and Lee, 2004).

In addition, a growing number of politicians and journalists from post-communist nations, specifically, from Russia and Poland, raise the question of political biases in coverage of these countries by mass communications media in the United States. For example, inoSML.ru website, established by the state-owned Russian Information Agency “Novosti,” specializes in publishing online translations of a large number of stories from major Western newspapers and magazines, including such leading US papers as the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, concerning Russia. Most of them present a negative image of this nation. To counterweight perceived anti-Russian bias in Western, in particular, American mass media, the Russian government launched in 2005 Russia Today, a television news channel, which broadcasts in English to foreign audiences. However, there are few academic studies of this issue.

This is one of the first academic studies that examine the reporting on post-communist countries by American TV networks from a comparative perspective. Most of previous studies focused on representation of a single country, such as Russia, Poland, Ukraine, and Romania, in Western mass media (Golan and Wanta, 2003; Hickman and Trapp, 1998; Media Tenor, 2004, 2007; Norris, 1995; Russia, 2007; Semetko, Brzinski, Weaver and Willnat, 1992). Many studies examined coverage of these states only in major print media sources in the US and other Western countries. (See Bohush, 2009; Hickman and Trapp, 1998). However, US television networks reach much greater audience compared to newspapers and magazines, and television is the main source of the news for Americans (Norris, 2000, Pew, 2008).

A content analysis in previous studies showed that Russia received much greater coverage in US media compared to other post-communist nations. For example, in a sample of evening news programs of ABC, CBS, and NBC in 1988-1992, 17.3% of all foreign news stories were devoted to the Soviet Union or Russia, compared to 2.3% of stories devoted to Poland, 2.0% to Czechoslovakia and 1.2% to Yugoslavia (Hess, 1996, p. 32). Similarly, an analysis of news broadcasts of ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN during nine and a half months in 1998 showed that Russia was subject of 342 news stories, compared to 64 stories that involved Bosnia, 18 the Baltic States, and 12 Poland. (Wanta, Golan, and Lee, 2004, p. 371).

In both these studies conducted in the 1990s, Russia or the Soviet Union before its break-up in 1991 was the most covered foreign country in the world by the main US TV

networks. However, prominence of Russia in the US media declined significantly since 9/11 because of the shifting focus towards coverage of the Middle Eastern countries, such as Iraq and Afghanistan. A content analysis of evening news programs by three main US TV networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) and two magazines (*Time* and *Newsweek*) between July 2003 and July 2004 showed that Russia dropped to the second dozen of most covered countries. However, Russia remained the leader of American media attention among post-communist states. A much higher number (116) of news reports dealt with Russia compared to 61 news stories that focused on other post-communist countries. Georgia, Bulgaria, and Poland were subject of the greatest number of stories among post-Soviet and East Central European countries. (See Media Tenor, 2004).

Some studies argue that US mass media suffers from an anti-Russian bias or even Russophobia, which means irrational dislike and fear of Russia and Russians (See, for example, Boykewich, 2009; Lieven, 2000a, 2000b).<sup>1</sup> For instance, much of the coverage of the two wars in Chechnya in the US mass media and in Western media in general “has been relentlessly one-sided and relentlessly anti-Russian” (Lieven, 2000a). It mostly focused on the effects of the Russian actions on Chechen civilians and it largely ignored or minimized the role of attacks carried out by Islamic fundamentalists, terrorists, and kidnappers in Chechnya in the start of the violent conflict in 1994 and its resumption in 1999. (See Lieven, 2000a, 2000b).

A content analysis of the *New York Times*, selected television news programs of ABC, CNN, CSPAN, and CBN, and two radio talk shows in 1995 found that coverage of Russia and Boris Yeltsin, the Russian president at the time, focused on the war in Chechnya and it was very negative (Pew, 1995). This study concluded the following:

Most of the stories with a perceptible tone were negative about Russia as a nation and overwhelmingly negative toward its current leadership, specifically including president Boris Yeltsin. The coverage was also negative in outlook for the current regime and for the current political system there. About the only policy issue regarding Russia on which the coverage was positive was the attitude toward U.S. involvement in that country. (Pew, 1995, p. 13)

Similarly, a study of evening news programs of ABC, CBS, and NBC from 2002 till the middle of 2004 reported that coverage of Russia was overwhelmingly negative, in particular, on issues which received greatest media attention, such as the conflict in Chechnya, terrorism, and the Olympic Games (See Russia, 2004). A content analysis of evening news programs of ABC, CBS, and NBC and *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines between July 2003 and July 2004 showed that coverage of Russia, Bulgaria, and Romania was more negative than coverage of Georgia, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Bosnia. However, with the exception of Russia, the number of stories dealing with the other post-communist nations was too small to make this analysis reliable. For example, it included 2 stories concerning the Czech Republic, 3 Romania, and 6 Bulgaria. (Media Tenor, 2004). In contrast, another study found that coverage of both Russia and Poland by ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN in 1998 was neutral, and not much different from coverage of such countries as Germany, Canada, and Italy (Wanta, Golan, and Lee, 2004, p. 373). However, the coding of most stories dealing with reporting about such US adversaries as Cuba, Iran, and North Korea as neutral towards these countries raises questions about validity of the coding in this study.

Some academic studies indicate that US mass media frequently equated Russia with the Soviet Union, and this misrepresentation extended to a certain extent to post-Soviet states. For example, American mass media often referred to members of organized crime from post-Soviet countries as ‘Russian mafia’ even though academic studies revealed that most criminals among immigrants from the Soviet Union in the United States were not ethnically Russian, and they were not organized formally and hierarchically like the Italian mafia. Similarly, organized crime networks in Russia include a large proportion of ethnic minorities, primarily Chechens, and people from countries of the Caucasus region, in particular, Georgia. (See Finckenauer and Waring, 1998).

A few previous studies of representation of Ukraine by mass media of Western countries were conducted by commercial firms, primarily, for the Ukrainian government. These reports found that Ukraine is mostly associated in Western mass media with “the Orange Revolution,” political instability, the Chernobyl (Chornobyl) nuclear disaster, and contentious relations with Russia. However, full results of these studies were not made public. (See Bohush, 2009).

The first hypothesis tested in this paper is that US allies among post-communist countries are likely to receive much better coverage compared to US adversaries and non-allies not only in the areas of relations between these countries and the United States but also on other issues, including non-political. The television coverage of American allies is expected to be biased positively. Previous studies show that because of strong moralistic elements of American political culture allies of the United States are often idealized and represented as embodiment of ‘good,’ while adversaries of the US are presented as ‘evil.’ For example, Joseph (Iosif) Stalin was turned into “uncle Joe” when the Soviet Union and the United States were allies during World War Two, and his totalitarian rule and mass political repression were largely overlooked in the US, including American mass media, until the start of the Cold War changed the representation of Stalin and the Soviet Union into the opposite direction (See Lipset, 1996, p. 66). Similarly, Afghan and Arab ‘mujahedeen’ were often represented in US mass media as ‘freedom fighters’ during their US-backed war in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union in spite of their illiberal Islamist ideology that was reflected in their name derived from ‘jihad.’ Lipset (1996, p. 66) puts this as follows:

The United States does not ally itself with Satan. If circumstances oblige it to cooperate with evil regimes, they are converted into agents of virtue... Americans feel the need to turn the bad guys on their side into good guys.

The second hypothesis is that coverage of Russia by US TV networks is biased negatively. This study expects to find a skewed pattern of coverage of this country that was reported in most of previous studies and a negative bias against Russia. The third hypothesis is that other post-Soviet countries, such as Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Georgia, and Belarus, are also likely to be affected by the anti-Russian bias in their coverage since they still are associated with Russia to a significant extent, in particular because these post-Soviet states, which became independent in 1991, receive disproportionately low amount of reporting on the US television, in contrast to Russia and East Central European countries.

Because of such positive and negative biases, the representation of post-communist countries, in particular, their politics, by US television is likely to be distorted to a significant

extent. However, such virtual reality is likely to have real consequences, for instance, in terms of public opinion concerning post-communist nations and US foreign policy towards these states.

### **Data and Methodology**

This study uses quantitative analysis and content analysis of news programs from the most watched U.S. TV networks: ABC, CBS, and NBC from 2004-2008. The following news programs are examined: World News, Nightline, and 20/20 on ABC; CBS Evening News, CBS Sunday Night News, 48 Hours, 60 Minutes, and 60 Minutes II on CBS; and NBC Nightly News and Dateline on NBC. These are main evening news programs from the leading US TV networks.

A keyword search of full-text of television transcripts in the Lexis-Nexis database is employed to identify specific broadcasts and news stories that focused on major post-communist countries, such as Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, and people from these countries. For example, reports that are found with help of the keywords 'Ukraine,' 'Ukrainian' and 'Ukrainians' are classified as dealing with Ukraine. Because Georgia has the same name as the US state of Georgia, the search was limited to stories classified in the Lexis-Nexis database as pertaining to post-Soviet Republic of Georgia. A similar search procedure is used to deal with coincidences of names 'Poles' and 'Polish' with other terms that are not related to Poland. Only stories that devote 50 or more words to a particular post-communist country or people from this country are included in the analysis.

The study identified almost 1100 whole television news reports or segments, which dealt with Russia, Ukraine, Poland, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Hungary, Georgia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, and which were shown on World News, Nightline, and 20/20 on ABC, CBS Evening News, CBS Sunday Night News, 60 Minutes, 60 Minutes II, and 48 Hours on CBS, and NBC Nightly News and Dateline on NBC between January 1st, 2004 and December 31st, 2008. The total number of words in transcripts of these reports is about 550 thousand.

A quantitative analysis involves a comparison of the number, the word count, and the main subject of all news stories dealing with specific countries, in particular, news stories devoted to politics of these countries. A qualitative analysis undertakes an examination of the news stories concerning post-communist countries in terms of their reliability and positive, neutral, or negative context. Stories and major subjects of coverage are coded depending on whether they present a positive or a negative image of a post-communist nation from the perspective of the United States. Reports or subjects that present both positive and negative sides or are neutral are coded as mixed. The study uses comparisons among different countries to analyze the role of political factors, such as their relations with the United States and national phobias, on the quantity and quality of their coverage by the US TV networks.

### **Comparative Analysis of U.S. TV Coverage of Post-Communist Countries**

The analysis of transcripts of television news programs on ABC, CBS, and NBC from 2004 to 2008 shows that Russia received disproportionate coverage, compared to other post-Soviet countries. The number of stories dealing with Russia and Russians (733) was about 10 times higher compared to Ukraine, 81 times higher compared to Kazakhstan, and 147 times higher compared to Belarus. The length of coverage measured by the number of words in transcripts of television news programs shows a similar pattern of disparity (Table 1). The relatively large number of stories dealing with Georgia (81) is mostly due to the war between

Russia and Georgia in August of 2008. Coverage of this conflict accounted for 75% of all reports concerning Georgia in 2004-2008. (See Table 1, 2, and 3).

[Table 1, 2 and 3 about here]

With the exception of Georgia, post-Soviet nations received much less television coverage than their East Central European counterparts. For example, Ukraine lagged significantly behind Poland on both measures of coverage. Similarly, the number of television reports and the length of the stories concerning Kazakhstan and Belarus were far behind compared to Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic. (See Table 1).

Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, American allies and members of NATO, received largely positive coverage. (See Table 4). For example, main topics of television reporting concerning Poland included overwhelmingly positive reports about Pope John Paul II, whose Polish descent and ties to Poland were emphasized, and about Polish Catholicism. Reports about the US missile system in Poland and the Czech Republic focused on potential benefits of this system to the US defense against Iranian or North Korean missile strikes. These reports largely dismissed arguments voiced by Russia that this missile system would undermine Russian defense, and they minimized opposition in Poland and the Czech Republic against the missile system which would make these countries potential targets of Russian retaliatory measures. The TV coverage of Bulgaria was dominated by positive stories about a Bulgarian immigrant artist in the US and Bulgarian troops and hostages in Iraq. Similarly, positive reports about Hungarian immigrants or people of Hungarian descent, such as French President Nicolas Sarkozy were the main topic of reporting that concerned Hungary. (Table 4).

[Table 4 about here]

Georgia, a post-Soviet state that adopted pro-Western and pro-American foreign policy, hosted US troops, and applied for NATO membership, also received mostly positive coverage, which almost entirely focused on the war with Russia in August of 2008 (Table 3). Georgia was primarily presented as a small democratic country, which suffered an invasion of Russia. Many reports argued that Russia wanted to incorporate South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which were described as parts of Georgia under international law, establish its control over entire Georgia, and punish this post-Soviet country for its pro-Western orientation. The coverage included several interviews with Mikheil Saakashvili, the president of Georgia, who, in addition, accused Russia of unprovoked aggression against his country without providing credible evidence to back his claims, and interviews with other Georgians. In contrast, interviews which represented Russian and South Ossetian sides of the conflict were almost entirely absent. Television news programs on three leading US networks either omitted entirely or minimized evidence that Georgia launched an unprovoked large-scale attack shortly before midnight of August 7, 2008 against pro-Russian region of South Ossetia, which was a de-facto independent state since the beginning of the 1990s, and against Russian peacekeeping forces, which were stationed there.<sup>2</sup> Indiscriminate use of force by the Georgian army during its attack against capital city of South Ossetia that resulted in hundreds of civilians killed and could constitute a war crime was either ignored in news reports or conflated with the Russian attack and Georgian civilian casualties. For example, ABC World News Saturday reported on August 9, 2008 that "hundreds, possibly thousands, of civilians killed, apartment buildings and military bases destroyed, as Russian bombers and missiles pound Georgia, a US ally."

Similarly, news reports during the war with Russia and a visit by US President of Bush to Georgia in 2005 presented Georgia as a democratic country, while ignoring authoritarian actions of Georgian President Saakashvili, for example, his violent dispersal of opposition

protests, control over main television channels, and arrests of a number of opposition leaders. However, an assassination attempt against President Bush during his visit to Georgia also received significant coverage. Five percent of stories, which amounted to 10% of the length of the total coverage, discussed security of nuclear and radioactive materials in Georgia which were presented as potential threat to the US if they were in hands of terrorist organizations, such as Al Qaeda. (See Table 3).

Ukraine is another post-Soviet state which pursued pro-Western, pro-American foreign policy orientation and applied for NATO membership with US backing after “the Orange Revolution” in the end of 2004. However, the coverage of Ukraine was much less positive than the coverage of Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary and the Czech Republic. The leading news topic focused the 2004 presidential elections and mass actions of protests against falsification of the election results. The coverage contained positive representation of Viktor Yushchenko, his pro-Western orientation and Orange forces that supported him. However, many reports also discussed the falsification of the 2004 presidential election results by the government and a potential for escalation of the conflict in Ukraine because of support of Viktor Yanukovich by pro-Russian forces in Ukraine and by the Russian government. Some reports described the victory of the Orange forces as the democratic Orange Revolution even though Orange leaders, including President Yushchenko, either resorted to or contemplated various undemocratic actions in order to keep their power after their victory in the repeat second round of the 2004 elections, and they did not pursue revolutionary changes in Ukraine in spite of their rhetoric. (See Katchanovski, 2008).

A poisoning of Viktor Yushchenko during the 2004 presidential campaign received significant and similarly mixed coverage on the US television. News programs typically presented Yushchenko’s opponents in the Ukrainian government and the Russian government as main suspects in his poisoning because they were characterized as likely benefactors from the physical elimination of the pro-Western presidential candidate. Other possible versions, which involved allies of Viktor Yushchenko or oligarchs, were completely ignored even though he later publicly named one of his former allies as being involved in his poisoning (See Katchanovski, 2008, p. 361). Similarly, dioxin was described as an extremely lethal poison that was intended to kill Viktor Yushchenko, even though his poisoning and apparently similar poisoning of two Austrian women did not result in lethal outcomes.

Television programs devoted a significant portion of their coverage to negative effects of the Chernobyl (Chornobyl) nuclear disaster in Ukraine in 1986. They often overstated the health effects of the disaster, for example, by linking individual illnesses to the accident and omitting scientific estimates of the Chernobyl death toll in favor of extreme estimates. Positive coverage of Ukraine was mostly confined to news reports about Ukrainian sportsmen, in particular, Klichko (Klitschko) brothers. (See Table 3).

Even though Kazakhstan maintained friendly relations with the US without being a formal US ally, television coverage of this post-Soviet country was largely negative towards this nation. The large majority of stories (67%) that constituted 79% of the total length of the US television news programs concerning Kazakhstan from 2004 to 2008 were devoted to a fictional Hollywood movie called *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* and Borat, a fictional Kazakh television journalist played by a British comedian. The news programs broadcast stories involving this fictional Kazakh reporter and clips from this movie that presented extremely negative, biased, and factually incorrect virtual



image of Kazakhstan. However, there were only 9 stories equal or exceeding 50 words concerning one of the largest post-Soviet countries. (Table 3).

The coverage of Russia, which was neither an ally nor an adversary of the United States, was mostly negative. Major topics concerning Russia included relations between the US and Russia (almost 20% of all stories and almost 10% of the total length of broadcasts) and the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko in the United Kingdom (7% stories and 10% of the word count). (See Table 2). Most TV reports dealing with US-Russian relations focused on tensions between two countries on such issues as the US missile system in Poland and the Czech Republic, the Iran nuclear program, the Iraq war, and sanctions against North Korea, while mostly ignoring cooperation on such issues as the war in Afghanistan and international terrorism. Russian foreign policy was frequently distorted as striving to start the new Cold War with the United States, allying itself with Iran, and bent on restoration of the Soviet Union by military force. In contrast, Russian unwillingness to create a full-scale union with Belarus or pursue incorporation of northern regions of Kazakhstan populated by ethnic Russians was ignored in the television coverage.

Extensive television coverage of the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko in London in the end of 2006 was generally negative and biased against Russia. A leading version discussed during various news programs implicated the Russian security services in his killing because of his criticism of Vladimir Putin policies and his knowledge of state secrets, such as alleged involvement of the Federal Security Service (FSB) in a series of apartment explosions in Russia which, according to Litvinenko, helped Putin to start the second war in Chechnya and win the presidential elections. In contrast, other similar claims made by Alexander Litvinenko without offering much evidence, such as his claims, which lacked credibility, about involvement of Russian security services in terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 in the United States, London bombings on July 7, 2005 in the United Kingdom, terrorist attacks in a Moscow theater in 2002, and a Beslan school in North Ossetia in Russia in 2004, were ignored in television broadcasts. Litvinenko was frequently misrepresented as a former Russian spy even though he was a former officer of the anti-organized crime department of the FSB in Russia and military counterintelligence in the Soviet Union. In addition to largely undisclosed information by British officials, the use of radioactive polonium to poison Litvinenko was emphasized as key piece of evidence of the involvement of the Russian security services even though the same networks broadcast a large number of news reports concerning lack of security of nuclear and radioactive materials in Russia (See Table 2). Expensive polonium, was explained variously as a difficult to detect poison or as a deliberate signal by the Russian government to silence Putin opponents among Russian immigrants. However, polonium was identified and traced by British investigators because of its radioactivity. Similarly, the discovery of this radioactive esoteric material helped to make the Litvinenko poisoning into the number one topic of television coverage of Russia in the United States in terms of its length over the five-year period from 2004 till 2008 (See Table 2). Similarly to the coverage of the Yushchenko poisoning, alternative versions, such as possible involvement of oligarchs do discredit Putin or criminal motives, were largely ignored in the television coverage of the Litvinenko poisoning.

Terrorism was the second biggest news topic concerning Russia in terms of the number of stories and the third in terms of the number of words (See Table 2). The main focus of the television coverage was a takeover of the Beslan school by Islamic terrorists in 2004. Many of the terrorist-related reports included largely positive elements. For example, they focused on children who were taken hostage during the Beslan attack but survived. But the coverage also

featured negative aspects, such as a discussion of Russian government failures to prevent terrorist attacks and avoid deaths of several hundred hostages in the school in Beslan. Furthermore, a long interview with Shamil Basayev, a Chechen Islamist rebel leader, who was responsible for many terrorist attacks, including the Beslan attack, was shown on ABC Nightline on July 28, 2005 in spite of Russian government protests.

The next topic in terms of the length of the television coverage (8.5%) dealt with immigrants from Russia or their descendants who were either involved or suspected to be involved in various crimes. However, the analysis shows that most people who were specifically identified in these television reports as the Russian criminals or suspects were in fact not ethnically Russian. Similarly, the extensive reports concerning an assassination of Paul Klebnikov, a leading American journalist of Russian descent, dismissed evidence which pointed to the involvement of a powerful Chechen criminal gang in favor of speculation about involvement of corrupt Russian businessmen and government officials. Besides reports about computers hackers, this assassination was the main focus of the reporting concerning crime in Russia.

In addition to the negative coverage of the Russian actions in the war with Georgia, other major political news topics included mostly mixed and negative reports about Vladimir Putin and lack of democracy in Russia (See Table 2). The television coverage emphasized that the reelection of Putin as the president of Russia, the election of his hand-picked successor, dispersal of opposition actions of protest, detention of Garry Kasparov, the government control over mass media, and killings of journalists failed to meet democratic criteria. This coverage stood in sharp contrast with the coverage of Georgia as a democratic country even though both Russia and Georgia had similar semi-democratic political systems and they both experienced a drift towards greater authoritarianism. Similarly, the reports on the conflict in Chechnya were negative towards Russia, in particular concerning its ability to win this war, in contrast to the positive bias in the coverage of the Georgian war in South Ossetia.

Positive stories related to Russia were much less prevalent than negative and mixed reports. The positive coverage was mostly confined to non-political topics, such as descendants of immigrants from Russia, Sergey Brin, who was identified as a Russian-born co-founder of Google, Russian artists and sportsmen, and growing popularity of vodka, acknowledged specifically as a Russian invention, in the US. (Table 2).

More than 3% of stories that comprised more than 2% of the overall length of the television reports by major news programs of ABC, CBS, and NBC in 2004-2008 explicitly identified the Soviet Union as Russia or associated Russia or Russians with the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> For example, they incorrectly stated that Russia lost 27 million people during World War Two even though this number historically referred to the number of casualties in the whole Soviet Union. Similarly, some reports incorrectly referred to the Soviet troops in Afghanistan as Russian troops.

Belarus, a post-Soviet country which had the most adversarial relations with the United States, received overwhelmingly negative coverage by major news programs of ABC, CBS, and NBC. In addition to reports about child pornography and negative effects of the Chernobyl accident by three networks, ABC Nightline on May 18th 2005 in a lengthy broadcast presented as a real possibility a Hollywood movie plot, which described Al Qaeda terrorists obtaining highly enriched uranium from a reactor in Belarus and building a nuclear bomb. However, the number of stories equal or exceeding 50 words concerning Belarus and Belarusians in 2004-2008 was very small (5).<sup>4</sup> (Table 3).

## Conclusion

The analysis of major news programs of ABC, CBS, and NBC in 2004-2008 shows significant differences in quantity, the content, and quality of American television coverage of the post-communist countries. Such political topics as US-Russia relations, the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko, terrorism in Russia, the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine, the poisoning of Viktor Yushchenko during the 2004 presidential campaign in Ukraine, the war between Russia and Georgia over South Ossetia, and the deployment of the US missile system in Poland and the Czech Republic, were among top stories dealing with post-communist countries.

The analysis produces evidence of systematic positive and negative biases in representation of post-communist countries. In particular, the television coverage of such US allies among post-communist countries as Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Georgia was much more favorable compared to such US adversaries and non-allies as Belarus, Russia, and Kazakhstan. The coverage of many of the American allies was biased positively. For example, the reports about Georgia largely either minimized or omitted evidence that Georgia attacked de-facto independent South Ossetia and Russian peacekeepers and that indiscriminate force used by the Georgian troops led to significant casualties among civilians in South Ossetia. In contrast, there was a negative bias in the representation of Belarus, Russia, and Kazakhstan.

This study confirmed findings of several previous studies which reported a prevalence of negative coverage of Russia. The television coverage of Russia and Russians was dominated by negative stories, such as tense relations with the United States, the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko, crime, and undemocratic developments in the Russian politics. Many of the news reports were biased against Russia and Russians. For example, they suggested that the Russian government was implicated in the Litvinenko poisoning without presenting sufficient evidence or examining alternative versions. Similarly, stories about crime tended to misrepresent criminals and suspects as Russian immigrants or Russians.

With the exception of Georgia, post-Soviet states received much more negative coverage than post-communist countries in East Central Europe. For example, the coverage of Ukraine was much more negative compared to other countries that are regarded as US allies, in particular, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic. Such preconceptions against post-Soviet nations can be attributed to effects of the anti-Russian bias. This study presents some evidence that many former Soviet republics continue to be associated with Russia to a certain extent. Such post-Soviet states, as Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus, which became independent only in 1991, received disproportionately low coverage on the US television, compared to Russia and East Central European countries. For example, the amount of US TV reporting about crime, which was attributed to Russians even though it mostly refers to other people from the former Soviet Union, significantly exceeded in 2004-2008 the amount of reporting about Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus combined.

Because of such positive and negative biases, the representation of post-communist countries, in particular, their politics, by US television is distorted to a significant extent. Television creates virtual images of post-communist countries that are often idealized or demonized because of the effect of such political factors, as relations of these states with the United States or phobias against Russia and other post-Soviet states, which are associated with Russia. Such virtual television reality is likely to have real repercussions, for example, in the area of public attitudes towards post-communist nations and American foreign policy towards these states.

Table 1. Quantitative dimensions of coverage of post-communist countries in 2004-2008

	Number of Stories/ Segments	Length (Thousand Words)
Russia	733	399.7
Poland*	126	55.1
Ukraine	76	35.9
Georgia*	81	28.3
Hungary	20	10.1
Bulgaria	14	8.7
Czech Republic	19	7.3
Kazakhstan	9	4.7
Belarus	5	0.8
Total	1083	550.6

Note: Stories or segments less than 50 words are excluded. \* The number of stories might be underreported somewhat because of search parameters

Table 2. Content of coverage of Russia in 2004-2008, %

Subject	Stories/Segments	Words	Content
<i>Russia</i>			
Litvinenko poisoning	7.0	10.0	Negative
US-Russian relations	19.5	9.8	Negative
Terrorism	11.1	9.7	Mixed
Criminals/crime by immigrants from Russia and their descendants	1.2	8.5	Negative
Jewish immigrants and their descendants	1.2	7.4	Mixed
Adopted children	1.2	6.6	Mixed
Russian-Georgian war	9.1	5.9	Negative
Criminals/crime in Russia	2.9	5.2	Negative
Other Russian immigrants and their descendants	2.6	3.3	Positive
Mail order brides	0.5	3.1	Mixed
Security of nuclear/radioactive materials	1.6	3.0	Negative
Vladimir Putin	4.1	2.9	Mixed
Space exploration/cosmonauts	5.5	2.4	Mixed
Soviet Union	3.1	2.4	Mixed
Elections/protests/media freedom/democracy	4.5	2.2	Negative
Sergey Brin/Google	0.4	2.0	Positive
Accidents/disasters	4.4	1.8	Negative
Arts/Artists	2.0	1.6	Positive
Religion/priests	0.7	1.6	Mixed
Other politicians	1.8	1.3	Mixed
Economy/business/New Russians	2.9	1.3	Mixed
Sport/Sportsmen	1.6	1.2	Positive
Sex slave/sex slavery	0.3	1.1	Mixed
“Orange Revolution” in Ukraine	2.2	1.1	Negative
Medicine/health care	1.0	1.0	Negative
Military/weapons	1.8	0.9	Negative
Vodka	0.3	0.8	Positive
Boris Yeltsin	1.4	0.7	Mixed
War in Chechnya	1.5	0.5	Negative
Other	2.7	1.3	Mixed
Total, percent	100.0	100.0	
N	733	399,732	

Note: Stories or segments less than 50 words are excluded.

Table 3. Content of coverage of Ukraine, Georgia and, Kazakhstan, and Belarus in 2004-2008, %

Subject	Stories/Segments	Words	Content
<i>Ukraine</i>			
“Orange Revolution”	48.7	39.8	Mixed
Yushchenko’s poisoning	13.2	15.9	Mixed
Ukrainian immigrants	5.3	12.3	Mixed
Chernobyl (Chornobyl) disaster and its effects	7.9	10.0	Negative
Sportsmen	2.6	7.0	Positive
Jewish immigrants	1.3	3.6	Negative
Adopted children	3.9	2.2	Positive
Holocaust	1.3	1.9	Mixed
Weapons trade	2.6	1.1	Negative
Other accidents/disasters	3.9	0.6	Negative
Yushchenko’s visits	2.6	0.3	Positive
Other	6.6	5.3	Mixed
Total, percent	100	100	
N	76	35,911	
<i>Georgia</i>			
War with Russia	75.3	77.4	Positive
Bush visit/assassination attempt	18.5	12.0	Mixed
Security of nuclear/radioactive materials	4.9	10.2	Negative
Georgian immigrants	1.2	0.4	Positive
Total, percent	100	100	
N	81	28,299	
<i>Kazakhstan</i>			
Borat	66.7	78.7	Negative
Space flights	22.2	10.9	Mixed
President Nazarbayev	11.1	10.3	Negative
Total, percent	100	100	
N	9	4,657	
<i>Belarus</i>			
Child pornography	20.0	47.5	Negative
Chernobyl (Chornobyl) disaster effects	20.0	19.0	Negative
Political protests	40.0	17.4	Mixed
Security of nuclear/radioactive materials	20.0	16.1	Negative
Total, percent	100	100	
N	5	772	

Note: Stories or segments less than 50 words are excluded.

Table 4. Content of coverage of Poland, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Hungary in 2004-2008, %

Subject	Stories/Segments	Words	Content
<i>Poland</i>			
Pope John Paul II/Polish Catholicism	52.4	77.1	Positive
Holocaust/Holocaust remembrance	4.8	3.6	Mixed
Pope Benedict XVI visit	4.0	3.4	Positive
US missile system	7.1	3.1	Positive
Iraq war	8.7	2.7	Positive
CIA secret prisons	4.8	2.4	Mixed
Accidents/disasters	4.8	2.2	Negative
Polish leaders/elections	5.6	1.8	Positive
Polish immigrants	2.4	1.5	Mixed
Collaboration with Communist-era secret service	1.6	0.7	Negative
EU membership	1.6	0.5	Positive
Other	2.4	1.1	Mixed
Total, percent	100	100	
N	126	55,069	
<i>Bulgaria</i>			
Bulgarian immigrants	35.7	77.3	Positive
Iraq war	50.0	16.4	Positive
Economy	7.1	5.3	Positive
Pope assassination attempt	7.1	1.0	Negative
Total, percent	100	100	
N	14	8,650	
<i>Czech Republic</i>			
Holocaust/Holocaust survivors	10.5	34.2	Mixed
US missile system	26.3	21.9	Positive
Czech airline	5.3	11.0	Mixed
Czech immigrants	10.5	9.6	Positive
John Kerry's family	5.3	5.5	Mixed
EU membership	5.3	5.5	Positive
Art/Film	5.3	4.1	Positive
Security of nuclear/radioactive materials	10.5	2.7	Mixed
Iraq war	5.3	1.4	Positive
Sport	5.3	1.4	Positive
Czech weapons	5.3	1.4	Positive
Other	5.3	1.4	Negative
Total, percent	100	100	
N	19	7,277	
<i>Hungary</i>			
Hungarian immigrants and their descendants	35.0	44.6	Positive
Medicine/health care	10.0	41.6	Positive
Holocaust	20.0	4.7	Negative

Jewish immigrants	15.0	2.6	Mixed
Opposition protests	10.0	2.0	Mixed
Accidents/disasters	10.0	2.0	Negative
Bush visit	5.0	1.0	Positive
Iraq war	5.0	1.0	Positive
Hungarian memorabilia	5.0	0.5	Mixed
Total, percent	100	100	
N	20	10,071	

Note: Stories or segments less than 50 words are excluded.



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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See Tsygankov (2009), Katchanovski and Kushnarenko (2007) and Katchanovski (2007) on analyses of similar biases in US foreign policy, Hollywood films, and public opinion in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, reports by monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, who were stationed in South Ossetia during the start of the war (Chivers and Barry, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> The coverage of the Soviet-related stories associated with Russia was mixed.

<sup>4</sup> Different versions of the name of Belarus and Belarusians were used in the search of television transcripts.