

Power and Talk in Russian Political Culture

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The study analyzes Direct Line with V. Putin – an annual televised event featuring the Russian president in conversation with the nation-wide audience – to uncover political advantages of such televised encounters between the president and the public, discursive arrangements scaffolding them, and technical affordances enabling them. The study argues that the televised format arrests the otherwise emancipating potential of public dialog as the program’s design depoliticizes conversation, diffuses the power of Putin’s interlocutors, and directs the viewers towards a passive listening stance. The discussion evaluates the political effects of the program and concludes that television might as well be a medium that engenders passivity in viewers and projects the unchallenged image of the authoritarian leader.

Keywords: politics and the media, depoliticization, public dialog, discourse and power, televisuality, Russian politics

How do political leaders relate to citizens? This rather simple question cuts to the core political beliefs that support a given political system. All regimes depend on the support of the masses even though they secure it by different means. In a democratic tradition, leaders attempt to shape public opinion on policy issues and use public support to ensure success of their initiatives and their own political survival. To lead, democratic leaders often “go public” and talk to people directly.

However, the evidence of their success in this regard has been mixed. Some have found that presidents can lead public opinion (Cohen, 1995) while others have repeatedly qualified presidential leadership (Edwards, 1983), listing confounding factors from popularity of issues to a stage in the election cycle to competition among political actors, media included (Canes-Wrone, 2004; Canes-Wrone & Shotts, 2004). The media environment of contemporary leaders makes control over messages a rather costly endeavor (Edwards, 2006; Edwards & Wood, 1999). Moreover, television, which used to create “a shared national experience” (Wattenberg, 2004), can no longer deliver this result, as the audiences migrate and form alternative publics on new platforms and expect politicians to be available not only on a campaign trail and in the office but also online and through the social media. Still, democratic governments have obligations of responsibility to popular wishes and put efforts to reach the public cutting through the clutter of messages, high costs notwithstanding (Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake, 2011).

Curiously enough, mediated political communication is not a signature feature of advanced democracies. Non-democratic regimes too crave popular support to legitimize their rule, and they have not been oblivious of the media trends. Dictators use the media just as frequently and often just as creatively to reach out to their populations as do democrats. Some have adopted or adapted deliberative forums and town hall meetings, the forms long considered staples of democratic governance (He & Warren, 2011). Others imitate democracy in institutional and communicative forms under the international pressure (Shevtsova, 2009). Still others seek to grasp control over the Internet, fearing the democratizing effect of technology itself. Indeed, the web arguably presents a viable alternative space for political discussion and social debate substituting for the missing public sphere although the digital divide and the inertia of the social practices formed around the traditional media (Alexander, 2003, as cited in Ognyanova, 2009, p. 9) insert a cautionary note into praises of the democratizing potential of the new media (Ognyanova, 2009). Moreover, different institutional configurations have been shown responsible for different resonance of communication strategies (Gnisci, Van Dalen, & Di Conza, 2014). For instance, the effects of ‘going public’ “vary significantly” between the United States where it “fits nicely” and the parliamentary system of the UK (Helms, 2008, p. 54). Comparative studies have also emphasized the co-evolution of governing and the media (Helms, 2008; Miles, 2013) namely, that political actors often adopt the media logics – a process known as mediatization (Garland,

Tambini, & Couldry, 2017) – even though they may at the same time resist media technologies altogether (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014).

Thus, media choices made by leaders of different political convictions and their governing goals might be associated in an intricate way. To focus on such a relationship, this study explores presidential communication in Russia and the role of television in Russia's governing project. As the country slides to authoritarianism (Balzer, 2003; Gill, 2006; Horvath, 2011; Lukin, 2009; Monaghan, 2012; Tsygankov, 2005; Sakwa, 2013; Sil & Cheng, 2004; Worth, 2009), it becomes even more imperative to understand what messages Russians expect from their leaders and what message they find persuasive, especially since a long-predicted collapse of Putinism due to its innate features (Aron, 2009) has not materialized. Neither has the revolt of the Russian masses. Quite to the contrary, President Putin's approval ratings rarely drop below 60%, standing at times as tall as 89% – a level of support unimaginable by most democratic leaders (Levada Center, 2015b).

In order to understand how Russian leaders lead and Russian masses follow, I select a particularly instructive instance of presidential communication, namely, the annual televised Q&A with President Putin. The choice of television as the medium for this event is central to its communicative and political success. Immensely popular among Russian elites (Burrett, 2011), television is also a primary source of news to about 90% of the population (Volkov & Goncharov, 2014) who trust it more (50%) than they do such staple news providers as friends (20%) and newspapers (14%) (p.4), stubbornly believing at the same time in their independence from television. Thus, 37% of television viewers feel that nothing would change in their lives had they stopped watching, 23% expect only slight change, and only 26% imagine change to be significant (Fond Obshchestvennogo Mnenia, 2014b). It is not surprising, then, that the medium is recruited for political purposes.

Political Effects of Television

As a medium of political communication, television is regarded to be more powerful than newspapers or radio thanks to the so-called “trap effect” – the ability to influence those who know very little about politics but who may increase political knowledge and therefore change attitudes if exposed to political coverage (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003; McKinney & Warner, 2013; Schoenbach & Lauf, 2002). The political “record” of television is not stellar, though, and its effects are often double-edged (Baum & Kernell, 1999; West, 1991). Televised debates among presidential hopefuls have devolved to curtail the freedoms of the participants to ask any question they want (McKinney, 2005). Phone-in programs designed to solicit participation from ordinary people routinely defuse their power (Thornborrow, 2001). “Grilling politicians” in a studio interview, sanctioned by the roles of journalists as watchdogs of democracy, collides with the cultural norms of politeness observed by the viewers (Ben-Porath, 2010). Presidents have been found most persuasive when they bypass the news media and deliver their message to the public undiluted (Rottinghaus, 2010, as cited in Miles, 2013); yet, frequent coverage threatens to trivialize the image of the public office (Meyrowitz, 1985).

Media scholars have also noted the social patterns of media use (“protocols,” as Gitelman (2006) calls them) that develop around the technical core and “tap” into “what is important and what isn't” and “who is significant and who isn't” (Gitelman, 2006, p.2). Such patterns are most effective when the technical core becomes “invisible” and pushes the social meaning to the surface, that is, when the meaning of playing a computer game or of talking on the phone is more important than the coding behind the software or the physics of a sound transmission. In the case of television, she argues, the viewing experience is structured by the “protocols of passivity” whose presence though sunk into the background is crucial to what the audience make of television.

Therefore, we can expect that the “protocols of passivity” underlying the viewing experience of the TV audience would nurture non-rebellious political behavior. A similar and by far a more powerful charge against television is made by Sartori (1997) who argues that the political power of television depends on the primacy of the image which supports viewing without understanding. Unlike earlier media, television – in fact, “televsuality” as he calls it – destroys more knowledge than it transmits and forms a backbone of “videocracy” – the practice of shaping public opinion via television.

In what follows, I will argue that a TV program that puts President Putin and Russian citizens in conversation works as a successful political technology precisely because of the technical affordance of television (its televisuality) and the social practices of its consumption, that is, the protocols of passivity developed around

television. The program I analyze below transposes the norms of television viewing into a new realm, namely, into politics. In such a transposition and in viewing without much engagement lies a deeper meaning of watching the president answering questions from fellow citizens, watching others asking questions or waiting for a chance of being put on air in full view of the “entire” nation.

The Program’s Background

Direct Line with V. Putin is a nation-wide conversation of the Russian president with citizens that has run every non-election year during Vladimir Putin’s tenure. First aired in December 2001, the program is simultaneously broadcast on the radio and Russia’s major television stations. Earlier programs also maintained their own informational websites and published transcripts, audio (then video) recordings, callers’ demographics, and thematic lists of FAQs. Currently, full-text transcripts, videos and photos are available on the Kremlin’s website (<http://kremlin.ru>). Every year the program becomes more technologically sophisticated, coordinating millions of questions that arrive by various channels (RIA Novosti, 2014; President of Russia, 2013). On the air, it runs for approximately three hours during which the president answers 75 questions on average, ranging from 49 questions in 2001 and to 112 in 2013 (see Table 1).

Table 1

Three “First” Direct Lines with V. Putin

Speaking Turn in Words (%)				
Year	Broadcast Date	Audience	Hosts	President
2001	24-Dec	1951 (11.51)	3550 (20.94)	11449 (67.55)
2005	27-Sep	2485 (12.69)	3385 (17.28)	13717 (70.03)
2013	25-Apr	5913 (18.23)	5291 (16.32)	21226 (65.45)

The program’s name alludes to a phone line that, bypassing a switchboard operator or a secretary, provides access to a powerful individual. It carries the imagery of privilege and promises exclusive experience to the audience. So far, Vladimir Putin has been the only Russian leader who regularly “faces the nation,” both in his capacity of President as well as that of Prime Minister from 2008 to 2012, and, as a genre of political communication, *Direct Line (DL)* remains Putin’s innovation. The program’s regularity suggests its considerable importance to the communicative repertoire of the Russian president and its unparalleled benefits, which this study aims to uncover.

For several days prior to the air time, the public is invited to submit their queries via widely publicized portals and hotline contacts. Questions can be mailed, cabled, posted online, texted, or sent in a video format and are accepted until the end the program. During the program, a call-center facilitates phoned-in questions, and select incoming text messages are displayed on a large screen in the studio and on the TV screens of home viewers. Television crews stationed at several locations across Russia enable live participation of Russian residents. Since 2008 *DL* has also invited studio guests. The program opens with a greeting from the hosts who introduce the president who gives brief remarks on the state of the nation after which the Q&A proper starts.

As many high-profile events, the program is thoroughly prepared and might in parts be rehearsed. To minimize surprises, participants are instructed “how to behave during the broadcast” (Gorham, 2014, p. 142). Commentators also note short delays in the broadcast transmission that would allow editing (Slon.ru, 2016). The *DL* viewers, however, do not seem to be cognizant of planted questions (Gorham, 2014, p. 143), or else they are not troubled by them. In fact, *DL* is considerably well attended and well-received. In April 2014, 55% of respondents confirmed their knowledge of the program (42% attended to it and were familiar with the president’s responses), 30% heard about it while 14% never heard about it (Fond Obshchestvennogo Mneniya, 2014a). A year later, even more of them (58%) reported watching the program and 59% would want to ask a question themselves (Fond Obshchestvennogo Mneniya, 2015). Moreover, Russians not only pay attention to the program but also find Putin’s performance on it to be improving (Fond Obshchestvennogo Mneniya, 2014a).

Dissecting the program's communicative design, scholars have noted the absence of hard, probing questions, a circumstance that allows *DL* to unfold as a "harmonious and cooperative polylog" with the president as the main participant (Ryazanova-Clarke, 2008, p. 312) and with politics largely gone from the discussion (Stanovaya, 2015). Scholars have also mentioned a father-like figure of President Putin (Gorham, 2014; Ryazanova-Clarke, 2008) and have drawn analogies between *DL* and petitions to the tsar, suggesting the continuation of a cultural practice of complaining to the authorities. Such analogies, however, obscure more than they reveal and weave their own mythologies in lieu of clarifications. Indeed, in the Russian Empire, all written appeals were by convention addressed to the tsar. Yet, aside from crimes on a magnitude of treason, direct presentation of the appeals was prohibited after a legal stipulation dating back to 1497. Sidestepping of governmental agencies "merited punishment" (Bogdanova, 2016). In the Soviet Union, various agencies received thousands of appeals daily (Fitzpatrick, 1996; Fuerst, 2006; Inkeles & Geiger, 1953), but complaining to the head of state "was never a mass phenomenon" (Bogdanova, 2016, p. 6), nor was he seen personally responsible for dealing with complaints. "In comparison," emphasizes Bogdanova (2016), current appeals directly to the President or Prime Minister are "legitimized and widely used" (p. 6).

This visibility of power, created and reinforced by television, is key to the political attractiveness of the medium and the effectiveness of *DL*, earning it a label of a political technology (Gorham, 2014; Bogdanova, 2016). In the words of President Putin himself, the program is a survey of a popular mood that helps him feel the pulse of the nation, so to speak. In 2001, Putin explained the format in the following words:

PUTIN: [when preparing this program], one could rightly imagine that today there are more problems than solutions and that people could speak about most unexpected matters. But I think, knowing the need in a dialog, that this form of communication is acceptable. And the top state official simply has to communicate with his [sic!] citizens, has to listen to them and hear them; there must be some feedback loop. You know, I often visit the regions; I see this need on part of citizens. I must tell you that to me it is no less important than to those who ask questions so that I could sense what is going on, sense what worries people. (President of Russia, 2001)

In 2013, he praised the program for the same opportunity to provide feedback from the regions and to present a momentous cross-section of popular concerns:

PUTIN: [...] Such a direct contact with citizens gives a very accurate cross-section of what is worrying society and what interests it at the moment. That is why such direct exchange of opinion, direct information, getting feedback from the regions is extremely important and to a high degree useful. (President of Russia, 2013)

This study explores how *DL* works communicatively and what it produces politically and argues that the meaning of the program goes beyond creating and propagating an image of "Putin's nation" (Ryazanova-Clarke, 2008). An autocratic leader with soaring rates of approval, a tight control over the media coverage of political matters (Gehlbach, 2010; Voltmer, 2013; Zasourskii, 2004), and three state-owned television channels that could easily swing the public opinion come the election times needs a program like *DL* and the power of televisuality it provides to structure political behaviors.

To uncover the mechanisms that deliver political benefits of the program, I ask the following questions: (1) Who speaks on *DL*? (2) What topics are discussed? (3) What goals do participants on *DL* accomplish by addressing the president? (4) What rules guide participants' behavior on the program? and (5) What do these patterns reveal about Russian political culture, particularly the relationships between the president and the people?

Data and Methods

To answer these questions, I content analyzed the transcripts from three installments of *DL* in 2001, 2005, and 2013 (see Table 1). Each of these years was President Putin's first year of a new term in office. The selection was guided by the assumption that at the start of the term, presidents are more inclined to launch new initiatives, to

energize public support for the work ahead, to “renew” the contract with the nation if they are reelected, and, overall, to be more hopeful than later in the term (Brody, 1991; Campbell & Jamieson, 2008).

To analyze the topics discussed on the program, that is, the program’s agenda, I extracted questions and categorized them according to ten thematic issues: social concerns, political matters, economic issues, security and defense, international relations, infrastructure and development, crime and law, morality and social norms, personal questions, and other/mixed concerns. These categories were established based on prior research on political coverage on Russian television (Burrett, 2011). To estimate the congruence between the agenda on *DL* and the national public agenda, I followed the procedure developed by McKinney (2005). I used the national polls conducted by Levada Center (Levada 2013a; 2013b; 2014b) and categorized responses to the question: “*What worries you most and which one do you consider most acute?*” using the same code-book. For each year, Spearman rho was estimated. The categories for the attribution of efficacy emerged in the analysis. A second coder coded 10 percent of the texts (intercoder reliability = .89). All codebooks are available in the Appendix.

Results

My analysis finds that *DL* works to produce public dialog as depoliticized conversation, citizens’ concerns as individualized, the presidential image as that of a capable task manager of multiple projects and an ultimate problem-solver. Overall, as a political technology, it disseminates teachable moments for citizens, elites, and the media.

DL Participants: The Making of a Nation

In contrast to millions of questions reportedly submitted to the program (RIA Novosti, 2014), only a handful of them gets answered. Thus, the portrait of Russia and of fellow Russians as they appear on *DL* is hardly a representative picture. Additionally, the program organizers make no secret out of careful composition of the participating audience:

DL HOST: Vladimir Vladimirovich, to the studio today we invited people who are well known to the entire Russia. Some of them are your representatives [in the regions]. Others ... are the people who have been featured in our news reports. They are not ministers or actors; they are engineers, doctors, local nurses – all true heroes of the day, so to speak, living in Russia. (President of Russia, 2013)

Similarly selected are the participants gathered on locations:

DL HOST: [...] Getting ready for the program, we invited to the sites of our mobile studios those who formed focus groups of sorts in order to discuss with them the most burning issues of the day: from rising prices, corruption, housing, issues in education, public health, science. (President of Russia, 2013)

Only a small fraction of questions then is put on the agenda by the viewers who call, text, and post online.

With these efforts, the picture of Russia awaiting a conversation with the president turns out to be quite diverse geographically, ethnically, occupationally, and in age. Teachers, students, pensioners, military officers, artists and actors, veterans, athletes, doctors and nurses, managers, entrepreneurs, farmers, as well as workers are regularly featured on *DL*. Although ministers and heads of big corporations are yet to appear, famous actors, media personalities, editors, heads of media organizations, directors of major museums, some politicians, and select governors are among the studio guests, mostly as audience rather than speakers.

Arranging this patchwork of faces and voices, television follows the steps of the “old” technology of print, namely, it constructs the “imagined” community and helps regulate the feelings of attachment to fellow citizens, the vast majority of whom one will never meet. Additionally, this diverse group is presented as sharing similar patriotic feelings, supportive of the president’s views, and looking up to him as the sole – and final – authority. The hosts always interpret the volume of incoming questions as an increasing interest in speaking to the president rather than an indicator of growing concerns unresolvable by other means and even less as a wish “to bring the President to account” (Ryazanova-Clarke, 2008, p. 314). Facing such a welcoming audience, the president indeed comes

across as the president of all Russians, embracing all and equally attentive to all concerns. Moreover, with a small number of questions from the viewers residing abroad. The territory under Putin's watch expands beyond the national borders and he emerges as an authority of a global standing.

Divergent Agendas & Depoliticized Politics

While *DL* participants repeatedly raise a set of perennial concerns, such as low pay and allowances, high prices, and poor roads, the overall citizens' agenda on *DL* (see Table 2) is prone to shifts and swings likely to be generated by the events preceding the program. For instance, while economic issues hold a steady place, social issues (health care, education, housing, drugs) fluctuate, and international relations – never among frequently articulated concerns – moved further down the list in 2013 while political matters suddenly rose to the top.

Table 2
Evolution of the Citizens' Agenda on Direct Line

Agenda items	2001		2005		2013	
	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank
Social Issues	24.49	1	36.76	1	5.36	7
Personal matters	20.41	2	2.94	6	10.71	4
Infrastructure	14.29	3	13.24	2	8.04	5
Economy	14.29	3	11.76	3	13.39	3
Crime and Law	10.2	4	4.41	5	15.18	2
IR	6.12	5	2.94	7	4.46	8
Morality & norms	6.12	5	4.41	5	7.14	6
Other	2.04	6	4.41	5	13.39	3
Security & Military	2.04	6	7.35	4	2.68	9
Political matters	0	7	11.76	3	19.64	1
<i>Spearman rho</i>		.403		.83*		.309

*p<.01

In comparison, the national polls capture somewhat different concerns. Year after year, the three issues (social issues, economy, and crime) make the top of the list (Levada Center, 2007; 2013c; 2014b). Only once in *DL* lifetime did the two agendas correlate (see Table 2), thus undermining President Putin's declarations of the program's value as a "cross-section of current concerns."

Similarly to studio discussants elsewhere (McKinney, 2005; Livingstone, 1996), *DL* participants interpret events and evaluate the proposed policies in terms of their impact on daily life, asking how changes in oil prices might affect their salaries, what national initiatives are planned to assist local farmers, and whether the measures to stop the drug traffic will prevent drug sales to teenagers. Over time, however, their concerns have acquired a definitive "statist" ring, while the intrigue of talking to the president might have worn. By now, Russians have learned plenty of trivia about Vladimir Putin to continue asking questions about his dispositions ("Do you take offense easily?"), tastes ("Which music do you prefer?" "What is your favorite soccer team?"), idiosyncrasies ("Why do you wear your watch on the left hand?"), personal history and career ("What did you spend your first salary on?"), or family life ("Are your daughters online a lot?" and "What is your wife cooking for Christmas dinner?"). The shift to questions of a larger scope allows the president to demonstrate command of various aspects of national life, from wages in different lines of work across the country to international politics.

The fate of politically-oriented questions on *DL* merits additional attention. In its first installment, *DL* carried none of such questions. They surfaced only when studio guests seized the opportunity to engage the president in a face-to-face conversation. Still, even the most political questions on *DL* are plainly toothless ("The authorities are after Navalny [an opposition leader – NK]. Are they afraid of him then?" or "Do you think that the Stalinist methods of managing the country fit the 21st century?") as they do not challenge the president's decisions or his rationale for current or proposed policies nor did they start a debate about any issue at hand.

Noting a shift on *DL* from internal issues to international politics, some commentators connected it to Putin's growing disinterest in the national affairs and his excitement about global issues (Stanovaya, 2015). Such reluctance to talk domestic politics, however, might stem from sources other than strict vetting of the questions belonging to a "stop list" of undesirable topics (Lipman, 2005, as cited in Ognyanova, 2008, p. 13). The cultural norms of politeness guiding conversation with strangers (Ben-Porath, 2010) might also contribute to the overall non-political tone of *DL* and make it void of adversarialness found when journalists "grill" politicians (Clayman & Heritage, 2002).

Yet, *DL* becomes depoliticized not only because international rather than internal politics is discussed or because certain political topics are avoided. It is depoliticized in conversation as well, that is, discursively. Of course, the diagnosis of de-politicization depends on how politics and the political is defined in the first place (Straume, 2012; Flinders & Buller, 2005). Following Straume (2012), this study takes politics to be "a way of organizing collective life" that values deliberation and debate in decision-making. De-politicization is comprised of many strands: populism that defuses conflict (Casula, 2013), a shift in the arena on which decisions are made that diminishes the domain of the political (Flinders & Buller, 2005), a promotion of technocratic solutions based on rules and thus eliminating the need for choice (Straume, 2012, p. 116; Flinders & Buller, 2005), and the recourse to a free market as the ultimate solution. Together, these approaches to collective life make the arenas of contestation invisible, power – fugitive, and society – apathetic as citizens no longer play a role in policy-making nor can they pressure the politicians who delegate decision-making to administrators.

Depoliticization in Russia has been described as "eviscerating" all institutions of real power (Gorenburg, 2011) as well as hyper-centralization of power and a propensity of the elites to implement their own projects (Mart'ianov, 2007; Monaghan, 2012). Its discursive dimension surfaced already on the first *DL* in Putin's explanations that policies should be economically beneficial and law-making de-politicized:

PUTIN: [responding to a question about immigration] Sadly, this sphere is utterly unregulated. Ours is not liberal but confusing law-making. It is too politicized [...] We have to have an immigration policy beneficial to us, I must say. We must attract workforce to [places] where the state needs it rather than allowing anyone to move any place they want to. The cabinet got an assignment from me, and we will be trying to put it through the Parliament. (President of Russia, 2001)

The appeals to the rule of law only intensified with time and with the increasing number of court cases which outside observers consider politically motivated:

PUTIN: [...] these girls from "Pussy Riot" and these youngsters who vandalize our soldiers' graves -- all of them should be treated equally by the law and held responsible. No one puts anyone behind the bars on purpose for some political considerations. The court sentences not for political views or political actions but for breaking the law. It is for everyone to observe. (President of Russia, 2013).

On *DL*, President Putin claims to be willing to talk to the opposition albeit at a place, time, and in the manner determined by the authorities ("*I am not simply ready to talk with the opposition [leaders], I am talking to them constantly. As for the non-systemic opposition, we offer this dialog to them as well. Some opposition leaders simply avoid such dialogs*"), and his vision of all administrative levels working as a well-oiled machine exhibits a remarkable tenacity despite testimonies to the system's profound malfunctioning that appear on every *DL*:

PUTIN (to a question about poor roads) [...] I will check what is being done there. I cannot inspect all the roads [myself]. This should be arranged at the level of the [federal] government and the regional authorities.
HOST: But apparently, Vladimir Vladimirovich, without your personal interference, nothing will happen, unfortunately.

PUTIN: That is Russia's perennial problem. [But] one only needs to arrange a flawless workflow. (President of Russia, 2013)

De-politicization of society has been noted to lead to political apathy. De-politicized conversation on *DL* does not produce the image of a vibrant, energetic, politically creative, and politically invested community either. Instead, interaction patterns on *DL* suggest the ideal of a passive and receptive audience inscribed into the program as well as the image of the president as the only capable administrator and, consequently, the only politician.

The absence of follow-up questions on discussion programs or a ban on a free exchange among participants have been shown to “take freedoms” from citizens (McKinney, 2005) or, in less dramatic terms, diffuse their power (Llewellyn, 2006), although the very existence of such programs is believed to contribute to the democratic public sphere (Livingstone, 1996). The absence of questions challenging the president on *DL* forms a discursive background against which any answer appears complete, final, and ultimately satisfactory, thus creating an image of an agreeable, supportive, and politically unambitious public which is then broadcast for the national consumption. Serving this end, the program hosts closely monitor the format of Q&A insisting on clear and succinct questions, a strategy whose details will be discussed in the section below.

Questions and Power

From its inception, *DL* has experienced certain tensions of the format. The program’s hosts steer it toward a Q&A session, instructing participants to articulate questions, while participants, skilled communicators themselves, tend to share stories of injustice, administrative incompetence, inefficiency, and neglect and call in with grievances and concerns that resist a question form. As a result, in order to maintain the Q&A format, the hosts treat any input as a question:

PARTICIPANT: I am Rzhanova Antonina Yemelyanovna, a war veteran. My pension is 1000 rubles. Please help me. I was on active duty. But even though I was on active duty, for some reason my pension is only one thousand rubles. I was part of the operation in Kalmykia, and in Poland.

HOST: Antonina Yemelyanovna, *your question* [emphasis added] is quite clear. (*to Putin*) Please.

PUTIN: I got it, Antonina Yemelyanovna. Thank you for your *question* [emphasis added]. (President of Russia, 2001)

HOST: Judging by the city code, the *question* [emphasis added] is by all appearances from Kuzbass: I was a miner my entire working life, yet the Honorary Order of Labor went to Maxim Galkin and Anita Tsoi [TV personalities - NK]. (President of Russia, 2013)

At first sight, this insistence on questions seems strange since questions usually carry more power in interaction by defining the parameters of an answer (Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Clayman, Heritage, Elliott, & McDonald, 2007). Yet, taking into account the distribution of speaking time on *DL* (see Table 1), the program does not look like a probable platform for the participants to exercise such power and “grill” the president, pressing him on issues of concern. Moreover, each participant is usually limited to one question and is instructed to be brief. The studio guests are the only audience on *DL* that has managed to bend these rules and briefly engage the president.

Therefore, the choice of Q&A is strategic here. It provides the president with a platform – safe of direct challenges – on which to demonstrate his knowledge about all aspects of Russian national life thus contributing to the popular perception of him as the only politician – at least the only trustworthy one. Contrary to the tradition of “grilling” interviews common elsewhere (Clayman, 2004; Clayman & Heritage, 2002), *DL* promotes a harmonious and respectful (deferent, rather) interaction that teaches the public how to “speak to power” and demonstrates to public officials how to work with the masses.

Such modeling of political behavior on a program that by design evades debate and discussion is key to the political benefits of *DL*: a regular, nation-wide conversation sets the norms of political behavior for all important players – citizens, public officials, and the media. It teaches citizens not to question the rules of a political game, but to contact the authorities, present their concerns, and wait politely for a response, instead of staging an opposition to upset or, worse, uproot the malfunctioning system. The public officials get a lesson in how to be accessible and approachable. The media learn to cooperate with the official line and be a reliable channel of transmitting official messages to the masses.

Political Efficacy

Constrained in the manner in which they address the president, *DL* participants manage to accomplish quite a few communicative goals. They put forward stories, describe their predicaments, and ask the president to comment on them and possibly suggest a solution in the nearest future. This communicative prowess, however, does not overshadow low efficacy, that is, a disbelief that one can change the system or influence decisions affecting one's life. In fact, prior research has found that in the absence of contentious politics in Russia, citizens "participate by contacting public officials with individualized requires" (Lussier, 2011), the very behavior bolstered by *DL*. What is remarkable about individual contacts is that they allow authorities not to expand democratic practices but to offer an individualized response – a practice known in Russia as *adressnaya pomoshch* (literary, assistance delivered to one's address).

Overwhelmingly, *DL* participants present things as "happening" to them and onto them either because of the "natural" order of things or because some unnamed actor forced them onto the masses (see Table 3). Moreover, their wishes often aspire to one simple ideal: the irritating factors (often uncooperative officials) be removed and the order installed.

PARTICIPANT: Hello, Vladimir Vladimirovich. I am speaking on behalf of all entrepreneurs: please, help us. Our taxes have been recently raised. We live in the countryside and we simply cannot pay such high taxes [because] the co-pay to the Pension Fund has raised a lot. I implore you, please help. (President of Russia, 2013).

Table 3

Attribution of Efficacy by Direct Line's Participants

Year	Self <i>n (%)</i>	Local/regional authorities <i>n (%)</i>	Federal authorities <i>n (%)</i>	President <i>n (%)</i>	Society in general <i>n (%)</i>	Natural order <i>n (%)</i>	Unassigned <i>n (%)</i>	Total <i>n (%)</i>
2001	0 (0.00)	2 (4.08)	16 (32.65)	11 (22.45)	0 (0.00)	1 (2.04)	19 (38.78)	49 (100)
2005	2 (2.94)	0 (0.00)	10 (14.71)	15 (22.06)	2 (2.94)	18 (26.47)	21 (30.88)	68 (100)
2013	5 (4.46)	0 (0.00)	8 (7.14)	41 (36.61)	0 (0.00)	24 (21.43)	34 (30.36)	112 (100)

When they do identify actors capable of bringing change, they quickly point to the president first and local government last, with themselves residing on the lower levels in the pecking order of change agents:

PARTICIPANT: Goryagin Igor Alexandrovich. I am a farmer. Hello, Vladimir Vladimirovich. I have the following question for you. I have been in business for about 10 years and want to ask you this: The agricultural produce today is not in demand. I have three thousand hectares of land [and] my harvest today all sits in my storage facilities. It is not needed.

HOST: So, you are not able to sell it?

PARTICIPANT: I cannot sell it, right. Here is my question: is the state going to pay attention to this [issue]?

PUTIN: I see. I see what we are talking about. I understand you perfectly well and this issue is quite known. (President of Russia, 2005)

DL participants position themselves as only marginally capable of resolving issues on their own through the existing channels. In fact, they often preview their questions stating that they have already exhausted those channels. As individualized requests set the tone for the program, very few participants pose as good citizens united by common grievances. Moreover, the very conventions of *DL* rule out the exchange between participants or the expressions of solidarity among them even when they bring up similar issues. A more prevalent stance is a lone individual asking a question, and accepting whatever answer is given to his or her query.

In their perception of efficacy, however, *DL* participants do not differ from their fellow citizens steeped in pervasive passivity (Levada Center, 2011; 2012; 2013b). Russians report consistent feelings of disempowerment when facing officials and bureaucrats on any level. More than 80% of respondents repeatedly report that they do not feel they can influence decisions regarding the fate of the country, and declining numbers of them feel that

“people like them” could have a say in such decisions. In 2014, only 12% of the respondents admitted their own efficacy on the federal level, a drop by a half from 24% who felt the same way in 2007 (Levada Center, 2007; 2014a). A more troublesome trend, though, is that those 80% do not want to influence anything and claim to be mere spectators in politics. Feeling disempowered on the federal level, Russians do not feel differently towards the local authorities either and do not believe that their creative energy can be turned toward local projects as a similar level of disempowerment (around 80%) is reported for local policies and local decision-making (Levada Center, 2014c).

To a large degree, such helplessness emerges through practices and experiences of dealing with authorities that *DL* – among other types of interaction – normalizes and promotes, disseminating the position that powerful authorities instead of self-organization produce a viable solution. Of course, *DL* is hardly the only platform in contemporary Russia that helps sustain the patterns of passivity. How other media and discourses contribute to apathy is a question for further exploration. It merits to note here that contemporary Russians report a more profound lack of concern for ordinary people among the current authorities than existed under the Soviet regime. Consequently, their expectations of care and support from the state are diminishing as is trust in all institutions, save the president, church, and the military (Levada Center, 2012; 2015c).

Against this background, Vladimir Putin’s appearance on *DL* to face the nation for some three hours is a notable exception. His visibility and accessibility bolstered and broadcast by the televised conversation helps build “personal” relationships between him and the people (Gorham, 2014), as the president repeatedly “takes upon himself” issues, concerns, and requests, and promises to look into the matter himself:

PUTIN: I am afraid I can’t be precise about the reach of this regulation into the Baltics, but if you think that there is too much bureaucracy in resolving these issues according to the existing laws, I promise that I will ask the related agencies to attend to this problem. Today, to be exact. (President of Russia, 2005)

PUTIN: Well, in general, I do not have a complete certainty that everything is executed properly, no. But I think knowing that I myself should simply pay more personal attention to and be more scrupulous about tracing all decisions that have been made to their logical completion, to their implementation. (President of Russia, 2013)

As media and political communication scholars warned earlier, too much visibility might lower the respect for the office (Meyrowitz, 1985) and the practice of watching politicians in the comfort of one’s living room might trivialize politics, making citizens more cynical about political life (Hart, 1999). Hypothetically then, going public Putin’s style might threaten his position and open the route for the frustration to trickle up and to place blame on the president by association. Surprisingly, however, Putin seems immune from such a development even as people continue bringing their grievances to him on *DL* as other mechanisms created for similar purposes have been largely unsuccessful (Bogdanova, 2016).

The Image of the President

In the section above, I have shown that the conventions of interaction on *DL* such as limits on questions and follow-ups, on the exchange among participants and the preclusion of arguments diffuse the power of the participants and emphasize the power of the president. The range of issues allows him to pose as a skillful manager as well as “a savvy businessman..., a military commander, a competent technocrat, and a superman” (Ryazanova-Clarke, 2008, p. 326), and the technical affordances of television, masterfully exploited by *DL*, make his multifaceted image even more alternative-proof, so to speak (Levada Center, 2015b)

Responding to participants’ concerns and requests, Putin frequently cites the official statistics and, with data at his fingertips, projects an image of himself as well-informed and competent. He also reports personal involvement in resolving individual situations. No request seems to be too small for him – from the burst pipes in a small-town school to a hockey rink to the new military equipment and international relations. Even when questions are ultimately relegated to the local administration (like the accident with the heating system), the audience does not see any other figure of authority by his side nor does it hear alternative solutions.

As the top person of the administrative hierarchy – the infamous “vertical of power” that President Putin vouched to build to make the state apparatus functional, he is inevitably perceived as keeping all controls in his hands and, consequently, as responsible for the lower rungs of the hierarchy. Hence, regardless of the division of labor between federal and regional governments, Russians see local concerns as a legitimate presidential responsibility. But this arrangement requires him to be in the picture – constantly – for the whole system to operate, leaving a loophole for the local authorities to sidestep the issues until they receive a direct order from above:

PUTIN: Dear Evgeniya Ivanovna and other residents of the Saratov region who happened to be in a similar situation. The arbitrariness of your bureaucrats knows no limits, if everything is as stated here. [...] I am simply surprised to hear this question. I am asking the governor to attend to it. (President of Russia, 2005)

PUTIN: I have pointed it out more than once not only to the company’s managers but to the Federal Antimonopoly Agency. I will do it once more so that they keep these issues under control. (President of Russia, 2013)

No matter how poorly the system is functioning, the popular opinion does not link Putin and the wrongdoing. Working errors are excused and his competence in sorting things out remains unblemished so that only 10% of Russians want to see a new person elected as president in 2018 (Levada Center 2015a, 2015b).

Discussion

The disaccord between the public agenda and the issues raised on *DL* demonstrates that gauging the public mood and getting a feel of the concerns in the regions – an expectation placed on the program by President Putin – remains unreachable. Yet, the program’s importance is not merely alleged. The form of a televised “meeting” during which the president answers questions offers several supreme benefits. Strategically, it turns public dialog into a governing technology. First, it instills the norm of a *depoliticized encounter with the president (and with authorities in general)*. Second, it *models acceptable political behavior* for the masses, promulgating the patterns of interaction with the authorities that obscure the political efficacy of ordinary citizens, and for the political elites, *disciplining the infamous “vertical of power”* by setting an example of how to “*work with the masses.*” Relatedly, it *reinforces the image of the president* as the only politician in the nation knowledgeable, attentive, capable of resolving problems, and quite personable and likable, an image that stands for the very idea of a functional government. And finally, the program disseminates the image of the discursively produced cooperative *political subjects supportive of the president* since the communicative design of *DL* hides any dissatisfaction of Putin’s interlocutors with his responses.

TV is central to delivering these political outcomes and to modeling the norms of speaking and relating between the authorities and ordinary people. Broadcasting the conversation, the program “closes” the distance between people and their leaders presenting the latter as attentive, approachable, and accessible while the conventions of interaction with diverse audiences on multiple locations normalize the absence of follow-ups, requests for further clarifications, or back talk, all of which could potentially trigger a debate. As a result, conversation on *DL* acquires a distinctly non-political character and instead of a free and equal exchange among participants, the program privileges presidential words. Effectively then, despite a growing interest in the program testified by the volume of submitted questions and their geographical spread that crosses the national borders, the program operates as a place and time of political assent. Dissenters, protesters, and the disagreeable public are elsewhere and do not appear on *DL*, where they might be mentioned but never seen.

The analysis above advances the extant research on the media and politics in several aspects. First, it demonstrates the discursive component of depoliticization as it is arranged, normalized, and propagated via the media. Second, it shows that the rhetorical power of certain linguistic forms (in this respect, questions and the adversarial tone) can be arrested and diffused by the rules of interaction. Third, it confirms the potential of the mass media to personalize politics and garner support for politicians. Finally, it dissolves the image of *DL* as petitioning the tsar and presents the evidence of its deeper and more fine-tuned effects that rely on the logic and mechanisms of television involved in the production of the program.

The image of united Russia seeking a conversation with the president is highly important even against the background of soaring approval ratings of President Putin. All regimes need support of their populations, therefore, all regimes benefit when people attend to politics, regardless of how the meaning of politics changes with time. Capitalizing on the power of television, *DL* makes the figure of President Putin into a media personality – even a cultural icon, according to some (Goscilo, 2013) – that stands for effective politics in Russia. In this perspective, watching the president counts as doing politics. Fortunately, the program does not replace politics in Russia. On the contrary, from President Putin it elicits frequent references to the political world that has not disappeared but has merely retreated behind the closed doors as the arena for experts but not for the mass public.

The public-related communication on *DL* is only one element of Russian political culture and, of course, if taken in isolation, it cannot reflect political practices and behaviors on other institutional arenas and among other political actors – parties, legislature, courts, etc. Moreover, the relationship between other institutions and the media might not resemble the relationships between the president and the media. To emphasize, social practices accumulated around the use of particular media are indispensable from the “effects” of those media on society, and patterns of political involvement in contemporary Russia need to be examined together with the media integrated in such activities. Specifically, the relationships between the Russian president and the people can be understood best when the role that television is accounted for. Indeed, mediatization of government as it occurs in Russia does not produce the effects known elsewhere, such as sensationalism, the onset of the “blame world” mentality, the 24-hour news cycle and some others (Cook, 1998; Deacon & Stayner, 2014); yet mediatization is not inhibited in Russia although its patterns and its routes certainly reflect the relationships between the state and the media. One aspect of mediatization highlighted by *DL* is the substitution of the effectiveness of government with the visibility of the president.

Although my data are admittedly small and restricted to a particular site, they are nevertheless longitudinal and shed some light onto the political culture that is cultivated through communicative inventions and projects like *Direct Line*. Most importantly, my findings reveal that President Putin’s style of leadership cannot be reduced to giving orders and punishing transgressions. The current political regime recruits the media not only to deliver political messages “undiluted” but also to shape up political culture (Cassiday & Johnson, 2010) that discourages public debate, verbal duels, and open confrontation with the decisions made at the top and praises cooperation, support, and “feedback from the regions.”

Commenting on Putin’s leadership style a decade ago, Sakwa (2007) pointed out that several of its features stem from its dual legacy of the Soviet leadership and of the excesses of the 1990s that produced “a distinctive type of political guardianship over society” (p.14). This guardianship mentality with its inclination of managing the state for the benefits of the people rests on the vision of the people as infantile and in need of care. My study adds another dimension to this governing logic – the use of television in disseminating the image of a caring leader who listens to the concerns that fellow citizens eagerly bring to his attention.

As any study, this one leaves several important questions unanswered, among which is the question of whether or not there is a different Russia, critical of what it sees on the TV, ready to enter politics and do politics, by taking to the streets if need be. Through focus groups discussing news programs, Ellen Mickiewicz (2008) has shown that Russians have not lost their critical capacity and can view television critically. If so, then re-politicization of Russian politics is quite possible albeit not by means of television with its current affiliation with the establishment and the ingrained protocols of passivity.

If Russians keep watching television though (and the survey results do not suggest otherwise) and the programs like *DL* continue, Russian politicians – presidents, most likely – will continue benefiting from the way of governing with and through television. With its assistance, an image of the masses and the president in an amicable conversation will be periodically dished out for public consumption to offset alternative interpretations of Russian political life and to counterbalance alternative political behaviors that sprout around the country. Strategically, then, participating in the program and reaping all the benefits that it brings, presidents will be reinforcing a protective belt around themselves.

Could a televised meeting with the public with, say, a modification in the form of follow-up questions, move a political regime toward accepting debate, deliberation, and, ultimately, a more democratic way of governing? For now, the answer leans toward negative. Technological innovations on *DL*, announced every year, now include new technologies as well, such as the Internet, streaming video, social media. Yet, as integrated into

the program, they serve mostly to harvest questions and do not promote new ways of dealing with power. The conversation continues following the mode in which the president's response is final. Russian citizens might like more how he handles questions on *DL* and how he behaves on camera but no new relationship among political actors are being forged on the program or because of it. Thus, Russian television continues reinforcing the existing regime and obscuring alternative political practices that are capable of challenging it.

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Appendix A

Codebooks

A. The Locus of Efficacy on *Direct Line*

1. Self
2. Local Authorities
3. Regional Authorities
4. Federal Authorities
5. President
6. Society at large
7. The natural order of things
8. Unclear/unassigned

B. Topics of Inquires on *Direct Line*

1. Social issues: Housing; Standards of living; Poverty; Social welfare (pensions & benefits); Healthcare; Drugs and alcohol use; Education (access, standards, etc.); Women and family; Disaster relief; Social justice; Migration
2. Law and Crime: Law enforcement services; Crime rate; Mafia; Corruption; Courts and rulings; Clarification of legal issues
3. Political Issues: The president, his duties, and decisions; Political parties; Duma; The Federal Council; Presidential administration; The cabinet; Elections; State apparatus & bureaucracy; Politics in the regions; Citizenship; Political rights and freedoms; Opposition
4. Economic issues: Salaries and wages; Prices; Unemployment; The budget; Banking and finances; Currency; Oil and gas trade; International trade; Taxes; Privatization (including land ownership)
5. Development: Industry; Agriculture; Transportation and infrastructure; Energy sector (oil and gas, not trade); Science; Innovations and modernization; Reforms (broadly conceived); Cadres, their competence, and training
6. International relations: International organizations; International agreements and diplomacy; Summits; International leaders; Russian leaders abroad; International security; Foreign policy
7. Security: Internal security; International terrorism; Russian military (including policies and personnel); Defense issues; Wars (including Chechnya)
8. Morality and norms: Values; National dispositions and attitudes; Religion; Public holidays and celebrations; Ideologies; Historical anniversaries; Historical memory
9. Personal questions: Character and habits; Personal life and family; Biography/Personal history
10. Other: Any question that does not fit into the categories above or mixes several topics together (such as ecology, media and entertainment, etc.)