

**STATE INFORMATIONAL CONTRACTS
AS A MECHANISM
FOR CONTROL OF REGIONAL MEDIA MARKETS
IN RUSSIA¹**

**ГОСУДАРСТВЕННЫЕ
ИНФОРМАЦИОННЫЕ КОНТРАКТЫ
КАК МЕХАНИЗМ КОНТРОЛЯ
НА РЕГИОНАЛЬНЫХ МЕДИАРЫНКАХ РОССИИ**

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Previous studies have illustrated that ownership of media capital is an important way of controlling media companies in developed countries (Garnham, 1992). However, we suggest that in developing countries, there are other forms of control over the media market. This research analyses the parallel financing models

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of media in Russian regional media markets. State informational contracts are the main tool of this alternative financing. These practices of state contracts are fully embedded into Russian regional market structure and are accepted by almost all media companies, both private and public. The 1846 samples of contracts collected from four Russian regions of a total sum of over 5,5 billion Russian rubles demonstrates the existence of parallel informational contract markets. This market co-exists with an advertising-based market. Using the mechanism of parallel financing, local authorities establish loyal relationships with media companies. We conclude that these financing models enable authorities to control the media market indirectly through financial tools and informal relations, rather than through participation in media capital.

Key words: *regions, media market, state control, state contracts, financing models of media.*

Существующие исследования, как правило, рассматривают участие в капитале медиа как важный способ контроля над медиакомпаниями в развитых странах (Garnham, 1992). Однако мы предполагаем, что в развивающихся странах существуют другие формы контроля на медиарынке. Данное исследование изучает параллельные модели финансирования на региональных медиарынках в России. Государственные информационные контракты – основной инструмент этих моделей. Эти практики альтернативного финансирования полностью укоренены в структуре российских региональных медиарынков и принимаются большинством медиакомпаний, как коммерческих, так и государственных. В результате исследования выборки из 1846 контрактов из 4 российских регионов на общую сумму более 5,5 млрд. рублей мы предполагаем существование параллельного рынка

информационных контрактов. Это рынок со-существует с рекламным рынком. Используя механизм параллельного финансирования, местные власти устанавливают лояльные взаимоотношения с медиакомпаниями. Мы делаем вывод, что такие модели финансирования позволяют властям контролировать медиарынок через экономическое воздействие и неформальные отношения, а не через участие в капитале медиа.

Ключевые слова: *регионы, медиарынок, государственный контроль, государственные контракты, модели финансирования медиа.*

Introduction

Research on media capital structure and control has become an important element of the critical tradition of the political economy, which argues that the ownership structure is a source of control over media companies (Golding & Murdock, 1991; Garnham, 1992). This argument continues a long tradition of critical theory, which shows that ideology is retranslated not through media content, but through the position of media companies as commercial organizations in capitalist societies.

Authorities in European countries can control the media and its content through ownership, but only indirectly. Pluralism is guaranteed in public media companies, because they have a model of public control which means that media outlets are managed by a public board or other collegiate chamber neither appointed by authorities, nor directly dependent on them (Pradie, 2005).

The public model of media was not formed in contemporary Russia due to several reasons. Among them is the low level of

civic engagement of society, its passivity in the processes of self-government, and the traditionally strong role of the state in Russian society. As so, the media model of Russian regions could nearly be described as paternalistic, determined by the duty to protect and guide (Williams, 1976).

In order to fulfill the function of social responsibility, the state contracts media companies and orders “social” content. On the occasion that a public board or other collegiate chamber is absent, the state defines by itself what is social and what is not. In reality social content often includes propaganda or promotion of state officials.

At the same time these contracts are an important source of financing to regional media companies in Russia. The media’s classical financing models include four main sources: audience, advertisers, state and industry (Picard, 2002). While state financing is defined as the direct transfer of money from the budget to the state-owned media companies, such contracts are an alternative or parallel state financing model. When the advertising market is poor, this source of financing is critically important for media companies to survive.

This paper argues that regional media companies in Russia are strongly dependent on parallel financing models besides on classical ones, such as advertising or public participation. Previous research in this area focused mainly on how the financial dependency of the media affects journalists’ work (Lowrey & Erzikova, 2010; Roudakova, 2008). However, little is known about parallel financing as a way of state control of the Russian market.

Since most regional media companies participate in these parallel financing models, we argue for the embeddedness and expansion of these parallel practices in the media markets in Russian regions. In this parallel field, media companies depend on authorities financially and as a result have to be loyal and sensitive towards their

needs. Thus, despite what the political economy of media suggests (Golding & Murdock, 1991), the ownership structure of media capital does not play a crucial role in media control in Russian regions. On the contrary, both private- and state-owned media companies are involved in these parallel financing models and the relationships they produce.

This paper highlights a number of issues that contribute to our understanding of state informational contracts as a parallel financing model. From our pilot sample of media markets in four Russian regions, the following aspects of alternative financing were investigated: the mechanism of parallel financing form, the key participants (both customers and suppliers), the types of contracts, and the distribution of contracts between suppliers.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first section is the literature review. The second presents the methodology. The third gives the results and main findings. The final section discusses the results and conclusions as well as possible directions of future research.

Literature Review: The Role of the State on Media Markets

Since the end of the 1970s, research on the political economy of mass communication has focused on the vertical and horizontal processes of integration, and the resulting concentrations of the corporate ownership of media companies, both within the media companies themselves and between media and other commercial sectors. The general claim was that capitalist corporate control contributed to the dominant ideology (Bagdikian, 1980). They describe a system (generally the US media system) that exists because powerful interests have constructed it, rather than as a

result of a “natural” occurrence. The striking structural features of this system are concentration, conglomeration and concentrated corporate control (McChesney, 2000).

Later studies in the beginning of the 21st century debate these notions and argue that examples where owners released content which was in their economic or political interests, or cases of advertiser censorship were not systemic. The industrialization of culture and mass circulation broke down ideological control (Garnham, 2011). Mosco states that “the person who sits on top matters less than the application of strict industrial models to media production and strict financial accounting that puts the interests of revenue, profit, and stock value over all other considerations” (Mosco, 2009: 69). We find these ideas relevant to the regional media markets in Russia since there is a request for privatization of state-owned regional media companies (Bocharova 2010). At the same time the regional governments are still interested in controlling media landscape in their regions.

The tradition of the political economy of the media considers the role of the state as a policy-maker in communication industries. Hence, the debate over the role of the state in communication industries comes down to a discussion of regulation and deregulation. Mosco distinguishes four processes characterizing state activity – commercialization, liberalization, privatization and internationalization (Mosco, 2009: 175–179). In this approach, the state is placed outside the market and plays a regulating role.

On the other hand, Pierre Bourdieu, a post-structural sociologist, argues that the state acts not only as an external regulator, but also as a market member that can play a decisive role in some cases (Bourdieu, 2014: 152–153). Neil Fligstein indicates that the state (at a federal and local level) is directly involved with the establishment of new markets and economic growth (Fligstein, 2005). He outlines

three main ways that a state can be included into market activities. The first one is through regulation, including regulation of taxes, proprietary rights, copyright and monopolies. The second is through the state's ability to act as a customer or sponsor of research. The US Department of Defence plays an important role in this type of sponsorship. The third is through the introduction of rules and regulations in favour of particular companies in particular markets. Often, these companies as powerful actors on these markets can influence the state (Fligstein, 2001, 2005). Fligstein (2005) maintains that the state and companies are closely interrelated, and this connectedness can be useful or harmful in different markets.

State intervention in the media market is usually discussed in terms of media-political clientelism. Clientelism is a form of social and political organization where access to public resources is controlled by powerful "patrons" and is delivered to less powerful "clients" in exchange for deference and other forms of service (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002). Clientelism can also be seen as a structural feature of society where common goods and paternalistic interests merge together (Roudakova, 2008). There is evidence that the regional media market in Russia can be described as a clientelism system in which journalists and their media outlets provide services to political and economic elites in the region in exchange for needed (first of all financial) resources (Lowrey & Erzikova, 2010). There are many studies discussing the prerequisites for these relations rooted into the Soviet tradition of fully subsidized media outlets, the turbulent post-Soviet conditions, the strengthening of the political vertical in the early 2000s (Koltsova, 2006; Robinson, 2007; Davis, Hammond, Nizamova, 1998), and the transformation of the professional role of journalists (Pasti, 2005). State informational contracts are an important part that form and support these relations.

There are few studies of parallel financing models of media in contemporary Russia. Erzikova and Lowrey (2014), studying how local governments control regional media in Russia, note that “while experiencing tough economic conditions, news organizations voluntarily sought to comply with the local government in exchange for subsidies from the regional budget.” It corresponds to the statement of the political economy of media that it is market structure that really “controls” media companies.

To sum up we can state that according to the political economy of the media, market structure and commercial purposes are the primary factors of control and reproduction of the capitalist order. This makes informational contracts an elegant tool for the state to control media within the structure of market relationships. Hence, it is valuable to study this parallel financing model, its mechanism and peculiarities within the market structure.

Methodology

The study design is based on the following methodology. The sample of four Russian regions was formed for the pilot research. Selection criteria were based on classifications of regions according to their socio-economic and territorial characteristics (Zubarevich & Safronov, 2014). The four regions selected for analysis are the Republic of Tatarstan (advancing in socio-economical development, territorially developed), Tomsk region (advancing in socio-economical development, poor territorial development), Rostov region (“middle” in socio-economic development, territorially developed) and the Republic of Mordovia (“middle” in socio-economic development, territorially developed). Types of selected regions represent the majority of Russian regions.

The data of all state contracts in the area of media signed in the 2011 to 2014 period were collected. The data is open since public organisations are obliged to publish such information on the Internet. The time period for analysis begins in 2011 because no information is available for earlier years. The database includes the topic of the contract, its price, signature date, customer (state organization), supplier (media company) and the organizational form of the customer (public or private). The database included 1846 contracts for a total sum of 5.596.251.482 Russian roubles.

The database was analysed in the following manner. Firstly, the primary statistic analysis was made to indicate the dynamics of informational contracts, its distribution among the suppliers, and customers and their organizational form. Primary statistic analysis was performed for 9 regions. After that the topics of the contracts were coded, employing an open-coding approach in order to determine the diversity of contracts' types (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Coding was performed for four regions.

Then the second part of the research was carried out. Coded categories were analysed using SPSS software in order to find out common regional features and differences from the sample.

Results

Diversity of contracts

The contracts we are studying here are a particular type of contract signed between state customers and state or commercial or non-commercial suppliers. First of all we describe the possible customers and suppliers from the sample, then we analyze the topics of these contracts.

The state here, acting as a customer, is represented by two types of organizations. The first one consists of federal, regional or local

organizations that represent the three branches of government – executive, legislative, and judiciary. They include different ministries and departments, courts, regional parliaments or dumas or other forms of judiciary authority.

The second type consists of state organizations fully or partially supported by the state budget. Among them are universities, schools, hospitals, and other organizations which provide services to society. An important point here is that the sample included contracts operating with financial resources from the state budget. Financial resources received by state organizations from their commercial activities were excluded from observation.

The main suppliers of the contracts are media companies. Besides them there are advertising or communication agencies, PR agencies, production companies or other companies that can substitute functions of media companies.

The method of coding allowed us to distinguish four types of such contracts.

The first and the main type is informational contracts that can be signed for both production and distribution of information. The subject of these contracts is usually defined as “informational support covering the topic of...” or “informational service.” It means that media companies (which are the main suppliers here) provide “all-inclusive” service packages to state organizations including production of content, distribution of content and other services according to customers’ wishes.

Besides “full” informational contracts, this group also includes separate contracts for production and distribution. The former ones are signed for production of media content, such as movies, videos, radio programs, and texts. Depending on the purposes of the content, it can be distributed in mass media channels (under other contracts for distribution) or can be used in the other ways (for

internal use of the state organizations, for outdoor screens during city events etc.). Not only media companies but also production and/or advertising companies are among the suppliers of these contracts.

The latter ones – contracts for distribution – are determined by the distribution via mass media channels of the content that state clients provide. The main actors here are media companies (as direct distributors of content) and advertising companies (as agents between state customers and mass media).

The second type is contracts for the publishing of official documents. These contracts involve the publishing of new rules, regulations and other official information that is obligated to be published. This type of contract is a good financial support for local print media because of the high prices of such contracts and the low efforts expected from the newspaper staff.

The third type is contracts for subscription. The main supplier in these contracts is the Federal State Unitary Enterprise Russian Post (Pochta Rossii) or other companies which provide the same services. The subject of these contracts is the procuring of print media for state organizations. This practice gives rise to so-called “obligatory subscription” where state organizations, besides subscribing to the print media they really need, subscribe to newspaper or magazine that are “recommended” for them to support.

The fourth type is other media-related contracts.

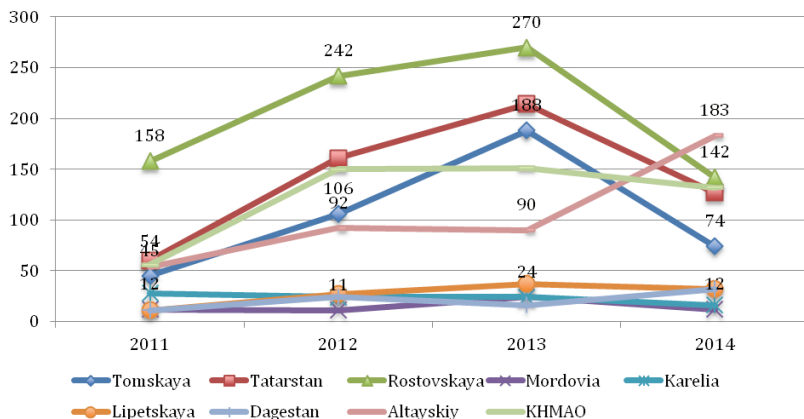
Number and cost of contracts

We analysed the database of the contracts and revealed that generally this practice is embedded and accepted by the majority of media companies in the regions of our sample. The number of the contracts either grew rapidly (in Rostov region, Tatarstan, Tomsk region, KHMAO, Altayskiy region) from 2011 to 2013 with a slight

decrease in 2014 or fluctuated around the same numbers (in the other regions form the sample) (*Figure 1*).

Figure 1

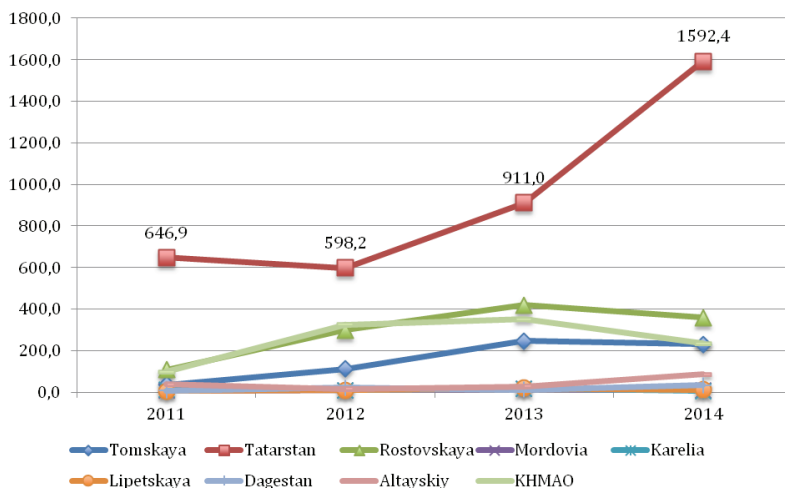
Total number of contracts in the media field in 2011-2014



The volumes of finance distributed by these contracts also kept growing during these four years (*Figure 2*). In eight out of nine regions the amounts of money grew quite evenly with a slight decrease in 2014. Tatarstan demonstrated a spike in 2014.

Figure 2

**Total amounts of money distributed in contracts
in the media field in 2011-2014, (mln. Russian rubles)**

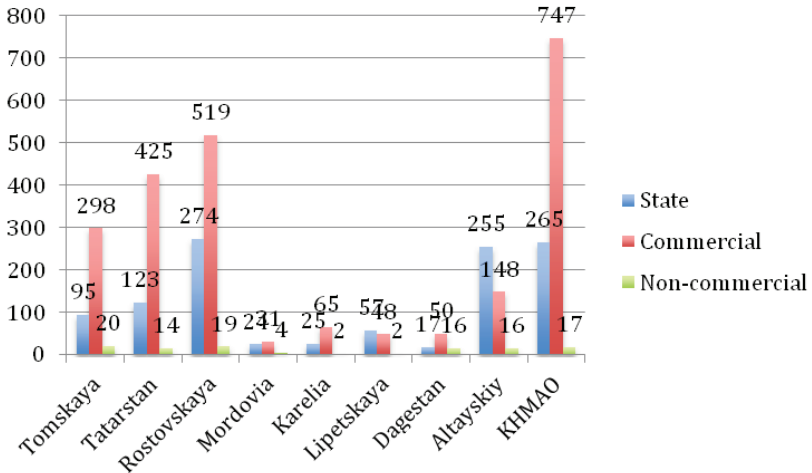


Suppliers

When it comes to the distribution of contracts among companies we can see that in all the regions the majority of contracts were received by commercial companies (*Figure 3*). This is important evidence for our research. It proves that state organizations placing such contracts focus on commercial media companies that don't get any other financing from the state in comparison to state-owned ones that are financed directly from the budget.

Figure 3

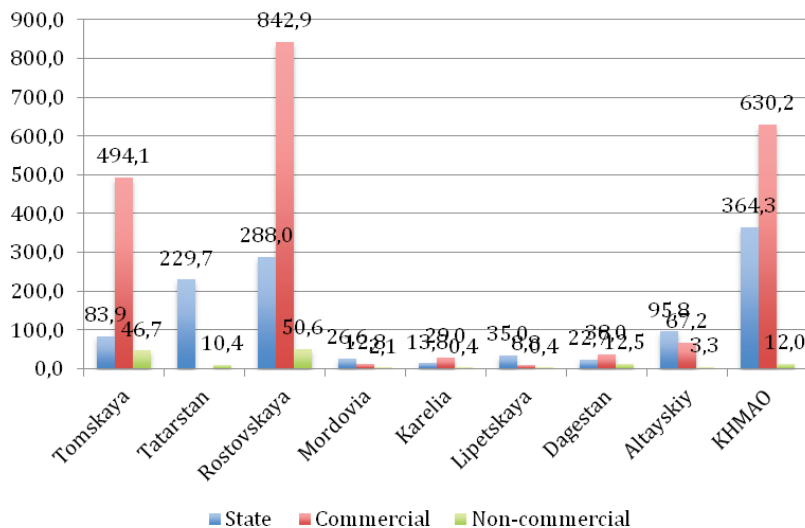
The distribution of contracts in state-owned, commercial and non-commercial organizations in 2011-2014



The same picture can be observed for the distribution of money between suppliers according to their forms. Commercial companies in all regions received several times more than state or non-commercial ones. Nevertheless, the indicator of organizational form should be used with some limits. It is not rare that shares of a commercial media company belong to state organizations or that the founder of a commercial company is the state.

Figure 4

**Total amount of money distributed in contracts in the media field
between state, commercial and non-commercial organizations
in 2011-2014 (in mln. Russian rubles)**



Each company from the sample received about 2-3 contracts on average; this amount is almost the same in the nine regions, with the exception of Tatarstan. It proves that the structural characteristics of the “fields of contracts” in these regions are similar. Average amounts of money also don’t differ dramatically – they range from about 1-4 mln. Russian rubles.

Table 1

**Average number of contracts and average amount
of money received by suppliers in 2011-2014**

	Average number of contracts	Average amount of money, mln. rubles
Rostovskaya	3,17	4,62
Tatarstan	3,47	23,14
Tomsk	3,15	4,77
Mordovia	2,81	1,97
Karelia	1,67	0,79
Lipetskaya	2,61	1,08
Dagestan	1,66	1,46
Altayskiy	2,60	1,03
KHMAO	4,64	4,53

However, the distribution of contracts is quite irregular. In each region several companies get the majority of contracts (and accordingly – money) and other companies are “long tail.” Thus, in Tatarstan first two companies (“Tatmedia” and “Noviy Vek”) get almost 90% of the total amount of money distributed in contracts. In the Tomsk region, the top 17 suppliers (out of 131) got 80% of the money. Notably, 26% of this money made the television channel “Tomskoe vremya” famous as the governor’s TV channel. In Mordovia the top 5 companies received 80% of the money and 57% went to a local branch of VGTRK. In the Rostov region, the top 13 suppliers (out of 256) got 80% of the money.

On the other hand, the “long tail” consists of 60-80% of supplier companies. In the Rostov region, 176 (out of 256) suppliers got 1 or 2 contracts only, in Tatarstan – 131 (out of 162), in the Tomsk region – 88 (out of 131), in Mordovia – 13 (out of 21).

State customers

We distinguished two main groups of customers – authorities and state organizations. Key customers in the regions of the sample were different. For instance, in Mordovia 68,4% of contracts belonged to the executive authorities in the sphere of press and mass communication (Ministry of Press and Information of the Republic of Mordovia). In the Rostov region, the biggest group of customers was also executive authorities: 41,1% of contracts were from regional and municipal governments. In Tatarstan there were two significant groups of customers: 30% of contracts belonged to the Republican Agency for Press and Mass Communication (executive branch) and 13.9% of contracts came from state organizations in the area of sports, tourism and culture. In the Tomsk region 35,5% of contracts were from regional Duma (legislative branch) and 22,5% of contracts were from executive authorities in the sphere of economics and finance. Thus the main customers in all the regions from the sample were executive authorities and executive branches.

We indicated federal, regional or municipal territorial levels of state customers (*Table 2*). In the regions of our sample, the majority of customers were regional authorities or regional state organizations. For instance, in Tatarstan 100% of customers were regional. Federal customers are rare and usually were represented by federal state universities. It proves that the main “interest group” of mass media in regions are authorities of the regional or municipal level.

Table 2

**The distribution of the state customers according
to their territorial level**

Territorial level of customer		Region				Total
		Mordovia	Tatarstan	Rostovskaya	Tomskaya	
Federal customers	Number of contracts	0	0	68	19	87
	% in Region	0,0%	0,0%	12,2%	10,4%	8,6%
Regional customers	Number of contracts	36	230	211	104	581
	% in Region	94,7%	100,0%	37,9%	57,1%	57,7%
Municipal customers	Number of contracts	2	0	278	59	339
	% in Region	5,3%	0,0%	49,9%	32,4%	33,7%
Total	Number of contracts	38	230	557	182	1007
	% in Region	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

Discussion

In the literature review we mentioned the ways of state intervention into market activities suggested by N. Fligstein. The case of state informational contracts on regional media markets is an example of a situation where the state acts as a quasi-customer. The prefix “quasi” means that we can hardly consider the state as just a customer. It turned out to be much more complex.

Undoubtedly, informal contracts studied in this article are embedded financing forms in regional media markets. This proves the stable number of contracts and amounts of money distributed. Our own calculations reveal that in the most prosperous regions the

total size of these contracts is equal to approximately 1/3 of the size of the advertising market in region's capital.

Surprisingly, we observed the inverse relationship between the size of advertising markets and the size of informal contracts. The initial logic was the following: the bigger an advertising market in the region was, the fewer informational contracts there would be. In reality we observed the opposite situation. Regions with high numbers of contracts and amounts of money in these contracts (Tatarstan, Tomsk region, KHMAO, Rostov region) are regions with developed advertising markets. All of these regions belong to leaders or advancing regions in socio-economic development according to N. Zubarevich's classification. This let us argue that the model of informational contracts is not a way to "support" media market in the case of poor advertising capacities. The primary purpose of the informational contracts is to provide a tool of control over the media market to authorities.

This parallel market of informational contracts is structured towards commercial media companies that get the majority of contracts (both in terms of the number of contracts and amount of money). It is not a coincidence, because commercial media are much more dependent on the capacities of the advertising market in the region. If the market is poor, such contracts become an important source of financing to survive. At the same time, for media companies such contracts are a kind of "easy money." However, it is important to keep in mind that commercial companies in reality can have the state as their founder or major owner of shares. The example of Tatarstan and Tomsk region illustrates this case. The top two suppliers in Tatarstan are JSC "Noviy Vek" and JSC "Tatmedia." The Ministry of Land and Property of the Republic of Tatarstan owes 48,42% of shares of "Noviy Vek" and the majority of shares of "Tatmedia." In the Tomsk region the top supplier that receives 26%

of all the money is “Tomskoe Vremya” Ltd., the company founded by the region’s government. Thus we can distinguish the following groups of companies as the most frequent suppliers of informational contracts:

- Commercial companies that are by default less independent because of proprietary rights.
- Commercial companies that are dependent on advertising revenues. In this case the informational contracts are a means of economic leverage.
- State and non-commercial companies. The former ones are subsidized directly from the regional budget and such contracts are an additional source of state finance for them. The latter ones are few in the structure of regional media markets.

So, the first two groups are the most important suppliers for the state. This evidence also proves the statement made in the beginning of this article. The parallel financing model of informational contracts enables authorities to have informal but effective control over the media companies without participation in the media capital as owners.

Additionally, the parallel financing model of informational contracts is an extremely stable mechanism since it is based on the paternalistic role of the state towards media. The idea behind these contracts is to support media in the implementation of social responsibility. In reality it is transformed into a tool of promotion for state officials and maintenance of political status quo. The financial dependency of media companies contributes to this transformation by mechanisms of self-censorship and self-control in order to get such contracts in the future.

Conclusions

This pilot research demonstrates the dual nature of media markets in Russian regions. On one hand they have a basic market where media companies and advertisers implement the classical advertising-based business model. On the other hand, there is the parallel market. In this, market media companies are competing for the contracts from the state, and the state acts as an advertiser or commercial actor, rather than as a regulator or arbitrator. Such contracts, being an important financing source for media companies, enable local authorities to control the media market in the region effectively without direct ownership of media outlets.

Nevertheless, the research has some limitations. First of all, some contracts have very vague subjects. Even the text of the contract doesn't contain any details. The subject can be stated as "informational support" or "services in the area of television." In other words it is not obvious from the contracts what it was signed for. The probable explanation of such contracts could be the absence of an actual topic. Such contracts could be signed, and then the customer and supplier, who are close acquaintances or friends, decide what activities should be performed later.

The other explanation of such unclear topics, beside informal relations, can be the real purpose of the contracts. Sometimes the contracts are made not for getting any media products but just to transfer money to the selected media companies. In this way such contracts are just a hidden or parallel way of financing media companies. These vague contracts and the real purposes they were signed for should be further investigated.

The current economic situation in Russia changes the circumstances of future research. In the situation of crisis, the advertising market will drop, so media companies will become even more dependent on state

contracts as a source of financing. Obviously it will be more painful for private companies that earn a significant part of their income through advertising. Simultaneously, regional budgets as well as the number of contracts will also decrease. That will lead to structural changes in regional media markets and the growth of market concentration. This transformation of media landscape and the role of informational contracts in the new circumstances require further investigation.

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