

Putin and Russia's Crippled Media

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Abstract

Putin's Kremlin uses media repression as an indispensable part of a strategy to prevent the emergence of credible opposition that could seriously challenge the current regime. This article reviews recent developments in the Russian media and explains key elements of this strategy. While television remains the most important instrument for the authorities' dominance of Russia's information space, the Kremlin is paying increasing attention to the Internet, given that medium's rapidly growing influence.

Systematic Repression, Marginalized Independent Media

Following his return to the Kremlin in May 2012, President Vladimir Putin has sought to tamp down Russia's growing opposition movement by applying even greater pressure on what remains of independent media in Russia. Online activism has been integral to the emergence of the protest movement and the Russian authorities have therefore devoted increasing attention to the Internet. Until now, the Kremlin's strategy of media management has relied chiefly on dominance of national television, which remains the medium on which most Russians depend for news and information. Given the track record of the Russian authorities on political expression and dissent over the past dozen years, the growing influence of the Internet as a tool for alternative discussion and political coordination suggests that the Kremlin will take a much more active posture to circumscribe unfettered online discussion. Such a development would fit into a broader strategy in which Putin has sought to eliminate or marginalize potential alternatives to his rule by manipulating elections, limiting the scope of civil society activity, restricting the independence of the judiciary and co-opting critical business interests. Media ownership by regime-friendly business concerns, including large oil and gas companies, is a key feature of Russia's current media architecture.

Today's state-controlled media does not provide serious or balanced reporting on events at the highest level of Russia's political system or offer a forum for the free and open debate of ideas. Instead, state media works to provide Russian viewers with an officially-approved version of what is happening in Russia and the world, while discrediting potential opposition voices or forces that are critical of the incumbent powers. A key element of this strategy is to provide a steady stream of high production value television entertainment that serves as a distraction to discourage citizens from becoming politically active. While the Internet offers alternative sources of information and is slowly emerging as a potential challenger to official media hegemony, it still has far to go

before replacing television as the main source of information for most Russians.

On the major indices that track media openness and pluralism, Russia's media system performs exceptionally poorly. Reporters Without Borders, for instance, ranked Russia 148 in its 2013 list of 179 countries in terms of freedom of the press. It particularly criticized Russia for the crackdown on the political opposition and the failure of the authorities to vigorously pursue and bring to justice criminals who have murdered journalists. Freedom House ranks Russian media as "not free," indicating that basic safeguards and guarantees for journalists and media enterprises are absent. The state's dominant role in the Russian media is most visible in its exercise of control over national broadcast networks. Freedom House's 2012 report on media freedom observes that "the state owns, either directly or through proxies, all six national television networks, two national radio networks, two of the 14 national newspapers, more than 60 percent of the roughly 45,000 registered local newspapers and periodicals, and two national news agencies."¹ As a snapshot, Russia performs poorly in comparison to most other countries, but the analysis from these independent monitors also shows that over time Russia's level of media freedom has eroded sharply.

The end effect of the Kremlin's systematic repression of the country's media infrastructure is that the availability of independent, local language news and analysis of political relevance is as circumscribed today as at any time since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Apart from limited radio programming, only some print media, much of which has limited audience reach, is able to tackle serious issues of politics, corruption and public affairs. Even in these cases, however, over the course of the Putin era widespread self-censorship has grown deep roots at news organizations. Today, print journalists and editors must increasingly rely on support from the state budget and routinely confront intimidation, lawsuits and other forms of harassment when they report on sensitive issues.

1 <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2012/russia>

Television: Russia's Dominant News Medium

Although growing internet usage receives much of the attention in reports about Russian media space, television remains the most important medium through which Russians receive their news. The sanitizing of independent reporting from the airwaves during the Putin era has achieved a powerful, negative impact. Research done on television viewing habits in 1999 suggests that access to independent reporting had the effect of decreasing aggregate voting for the government party by nearly 9 percent and that viewers of such broadcasts were more likely to support opposition parties.²

Putin made gaining control over television a top priority upon taking power in 2000 and has invested considerable effort to gain dominance over television media. Given the digital divide between urban and rural areas in Russia, less connected rural populations depend more on state media and as a rule have much less access to independent sources of information than their urban counterparts, including from the Internet. For the television audience, the Russian authorities effectively have the power to make individuals with critical voices invisible. In place of opposition figures, activists and social critics, public-affairs shows feature a reliable set of Kremlin-approved commentators. This enables the regime to have a direct pipeline for rallying its political base.

News and information broadcasts on television are largely devoted to praising the regime and discrediting the opposition. However, there are signs that this policy is starting to wear thin with viewers. While Russian state television audiences are still robust, they are not as large as they were earlier in Putin's tenure. State-controlled television sources (Channel One, Rossiya, Kultura and local RTR stations) served as a primary source of information for 73 percent of the population in February 2012, down from 87 percent a year earlier.³

Televised criticism of the opposition has gained notoriety in recent months. Gazprom-owned NTV, for example, broadcast a savage attack on the opposition in the form of a documentary series entitled "Anatomy of a Protest."⁴ The first episode, broadcast in the middle of March 2012, alleged that protest organizers paid participants to take to the streets and demand free and fair elections, as well as Putin's resignation. The broadcast inspired heated debate on the Russian part of the Internet and brought several hundred protesters out to the Ostankino television tower to denounce the regime's use

of blatant propaganda. Anatomy of a Protest-2, broadcast on October 5, 2012, claimed that opposition leader Sergei Udaltsov and his colleagues Konstantin Lebedev and Leonid Razvozhayev had conspired with Georgian lawmaker Givi Targamadze to plot terrorist attacks in Russia.⁵ The broadcast led to a quick response by the law enforcement agencies. While Lebedev was already under arrest, the authorities used evidence from the broadcast to charge Udaltsov with preparing for mass riots in Moscow during the May 6 protests. On October 19 Russian agents apparently kidnapped Razvozhayev in Kyiv, where he was talking to representatives of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in an effort to obtain asylum. He was brought back to Russia, tortured, and forced to write a confession. He remains in custody in Siberia.

In the immediate aftermath of the December 2011 rallies, state-controlled television news broadcasts have initiated some efforts to present a more believable picture of what is going on in Russia in order to prevent more Russians from simply tuning them out. With large numbers of Russian citizens taking to the streets, the government-controlled networks began to report on opposition rallies rather than simply ignoring them as they had in the past. A major change also took place on September 15, 2012, when state television stations showed Alexey Navalny, one of the most prominent opposition leaders, who has made Russia's runaway corruption his point of focus. While other opposition leaders, such as Boris Nemtsov, had on occasion featured in the news broadcasts, Navalny until that time had not appeared before the television-viewing public.

Television broadcasts continue to exert a powerful effect on Russian public opinion, according to the Levada Center's Lev Gudkov. He observes, for example, that the government was able to build support for the law banning American adoptions of Russian orphans by airing programming that repeated the unseemly message that American parents who adopt Russian children torture and sexually abuse them. These programs have emphasized the tragic exceptions to the rule, but through this jaundiced reporting lead many television viewers to conclude, incorrectly, that Russian orphans routinely end up in tragic circumstances under the care of American parents.⁶

In order to silence one of its outspoken critics, TV host Vladimir Pozner, the Duma even threatened to pass a law banning individuals with joint Russian and foreign citizenship from appearing on the air if they insult the authorities. Pozner aroused the anger of the

2 Ruben Enikolopov, Maria Petrova, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya, "Media and Political Persuasion: Evidence from Russia," *American Economic Review* 101 (December 2011): 3253–85.

3 Russians' Confidence in State TV Slipping, *Moscow Times*, April 5, 2012.

4 <http://www.ntv.ru/video/peredacha/296996/>

5 <http://www.ntv.ru/novosti/347117/>

6 <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/56510.html>

parliamentarians by calling the State Duma foolish for adopting the law blocking American adoptions. Eventually Pozner apologized and the bill blocking him from appearing on Russian television was withdrawn at the end of January 2013. Supporters of the legislation in the Duma claimed that they would keep it on hold in case it was needed in the future.

In addition, many topics are simply off limits in the Russian media. One such issue is President Putin's health. Putin cancelled many of his appearances in the fall of 2012, but the Russian media presented only limited information about the reasons behind these cancellations.

A Role for Radio

Radio plays a large role in Russia's mediascape, especially given the large number of commuters stuck in the country's numerous traffic jams. Radio helps to balance the daily diet of infotainment provided by editorially-stunted television networks. Ekho Moskvy and other radio stations provide live coverage of opposition rallies and their commentators offer a variety of views.

Despite its current freedom, however, Ekho Moskvy's organizational autonomy and editorial independence has come under progressively more intense pressure. On March 29, 2012, the Ekho Moskvy Board of Directors removed Editor in Chief Aleksey Venediktov, First Deputy Editor in Chief Vladimir Varfolomeyev, and independent directors Yevgeniy Yasin and Aleksandr Makovskiy from the station's governing body. This action has ensured that it will be easier to remove Venediktov as editor if the Kremlin decided on such a course of action. Gazprom Media owns a controlling stake in the station.

Radio faces other problems. The restrictive law that forces NGOs accepting support from foreign sources to declare themselves "foreign agents" also included measures to restrict radio operations, in this case making it illegal for radio stations with more than 48 percent foreign ownership to be on the air. One effect of this legislation was to knock off the air the broadcasts of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's (RFE/RL) Russian Service on local Russian AM stations that retransmitted the signal. This development occurred at about the same time RFE/RL management took the step of abruptly firing many of its Russian Service's seasoned journalists as part of a controversial restructuring plan that has caused considerable upheaval at the organization.

Growing Importance of the Internet

While the number of television viewers has been shrinking over time, the number of Internet users grew over the course of 2012, from 52 to 57 percent of the popu-

lation.⁷ This increasing popularity of the web means that the authorities are starting to pay more attention to what is happening online and taking more active measures in response. The government now sees online activism as an authentic threat to its position, given the Internet's ability to help mobilize popular street protests. According to the human rights group Agora, the Russian authorities violated the freedom of the Internet 1,197 times in 2012, almost 2.5 as many times documented in 2011.⁸

Not only is the internet becoming more popular with Russian users, more people are using it as a source of news, rather than solely for purposes of entertainment. Currently, as much as 25 percent of the population use web resources to find out what is going on in their country and around the world. In some ways, the internet is even becoming more popular than television—on some days more people visit the Yandex news aggregator than watch state-controlled Channel One though television viewers still spend more time watching the station than they do on the Internet.

Given its steadily growing influence, the Internet has sparked deeper concern among Russia's leadership. On November 1, 2012, a new law came into effect that enables the state to filter the web. In particular, the new legislation ordered the Russian Federal Surveillance Service for Mass Media and Communications (Roskomnadzor) to create a blacklist of sites that could be blocked on Russian territory.⁹ While the measure ostensibly targets child pornography and websites that encourage suicide and drug use, critics claim that it could be used by the authorities to censor targets other than those emphasized in the law, due the legislation's vague wording. Additionally, a court order is not required to shut down a website. By December 2012, Russia had blocked access to 640 web sites. If there is objectionable material on just one page, the entire site can be closed. The agency responsible said that it had already received more than 19,000 proposals for sites to be shut down by the end of 2012, so the number of closures is expected to grow. The government's drug control and consumer protection services have been particularly active in shuttering sites that they deem offensive.

Internet and Dish network satellite broadcaster Dozhd TV (<http://tvrain.ru/>) became an important source

7 Levada Center, "57% rossiyan pol'zuyutsya Internetom," November 12, 2012, <http://www.levada.ru/12-11-2012/57-rossiyan-polzuyutsya-internetom>.

8 <http://openinform.ru/news/unfreedom/04.02.2013/27991/>

9 Federal'nyj zakon ot 27 iyulya 2006 goda N 149-FZ "Ob informacii, informacionnyh tehnologiyah i zashchite informacii" (v red. Federal'nyh zakonov ot 27.07.2010 N 227-FZ, ot 06.04.2011 N 65-FZ, ot 21.07.2011 N 252-FZ, ot 28.07.2012 N 139-FZ), <http://zapret-info.gov.ru/docs/149.pdf>.

of information during the December 2011 protests because it was able to broadcast timely news reports from the scene. As an on-line television station, it offers an alternative set of news and opinions that contrast with those of the Kremlin-controlled television networks. One measure of its success is evident in the fact that the pro-Kremlin foundation, the Institute for Social-Economic and Political Research, has provided three year funding for the Kremlin-friendly Kontr-TV (<http://kontr.tv/#/>), which has established an on-line alternative to Dozhd. This tactic of creating organizations to mimic those that are authentically independent fits with a larger pattern that has become visible over the Putin years.

Crackdown on Journalists

Russia is one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists to work. Over the past 20 years, 341 reporters have been killed in the country, according to the Russian Journalist Union. Among recent cases, Anchorman Kazbek Gekkiev was killed on December 5, 2012 as he was leaving his studio in Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria. Putin has called on the authorities to solve the crime, while local officials blame it on Islamist militants. On December 15, 2011, assassins killed Khadzhimurad Kamalov, the founder of the independent Dagestani newspaper *Chernovik*. The republican authorities became angry with the paper in 2008, when it reported that innocent people had died in a counterinsurgency operation. While the killings of journalists continue, so far there has been no resolution to the multitude of murders of journalists in recent years, including that of Anna Politkovskaya in 2006. Impunity is the standard.

Reporters also face extensive harassment in the course of carrying out their duties. After the May 6–9, 2012, street demonstrations in Moscow surrounding Putin's inauguration, the Russian authorities detained dozens of journalists covering the event. Additionally, on May 6 the websites of *Kommersant*, *Ekho Moskvy*, *Bolshoi gorod*, *Dozhd'* and *slon.ru* were subjected to

distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks that made them inaccessible to readers who wanted to track information about the rallies as they were happening.

In a further effort to weaken the free media, Putin signed a new law that recriminalized libel.¹⁰ This represented a sharp reversal, as Dmitry Medvedev had decriminalized libel only months before, in fall 2011. Potential fines in the new law were increased up to 5 million rubles (\$153,000).

Conclusion: The Implications of Media Repression

Russian citizens enjoy access to a considerable diversity of information today, much more so than during the Soviet era. But this flood of information does not mean that ordinary Russian consumers of news have consistent access to meaningful coverage of policy and politics. For the authorities, blocking a candid discussion of what counts—news and information about policy making, budget decisions and the business interests of government—is paramount.

The media operating in Putin's Russia remain on a tight leash. The state has effective monopoly control over the most important medium, television, and prevents the airing of news and public affairs programming that could offer different political voices and policy options. While the Internet provides alternative information and opinions, it is increasingly coming under Kremlin scrutiny as the authorities try to limit its ability to facilitate collective action among the opposition.

As questions about the government's legitimacy grow, the authorities' media management will become even more crucial to the Russian leadership's ability to retain power. A decade-long strategy of undermining independent media has exacted a heavy toll on Russian citizens, however. The ongoing denial of authentically independent news media presents wider, negative implications for Russian society's ability to develop in a more transparent and democratically accountable direction.

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10 Federal'nyj zakon Rossijskoj Federacii ot 28 iyulya 2012 g. N 141-FZ "O vnesenii izmenenij v Ugolovnyj kodeks Rossijskoj Federacii i otdel'nye zakonodatel'nye akty Rossijskoj Federacii" Rossiiskaya gazeta, August 1, 2012, <http://www.rg.ru/2012/08/01/kleveta-dok.html>.