

Analysis

Kremlin Systematically Shrinks Scope of Russian Media

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Summary

Since coming to power, the Putin administration has systematically cracked down on Russian press freedoms. After taking control of the main nationwide television networks in 2003, the authorities have now taken over the most important non-state controlled newspapers. The regional media and Internet are next. Ultimately, the silencing of critical voices will undermine Putin's stated efforts to strengthen the Russian state and boost the economy.

Politkovskaya Murder Part of a Larger Chain

The murder of investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya in Moscow on October 7 has brought the issue of media freedom in Russia to the world's attention. Politkovskaya was one of the few reporters brave enough to travel to Chechnya and write about the kidnappings, torture, and murders of Kremlin-backed Prime Minister Ramzan Kadyrov. The assassin's silencing of Politkovskaya leaves a vacuum in the Russian media.

Politkovskaya's murder was not a bolt from the blue. While everyone assumes that the murder was connected to Politkovskaya's work, no one yet knows who ordered her death. Nevertheless, the attack fits into the Kremlin's systematic and long-term policy of smothering media freedom in Russia, a policy that has been implemented consistently since President Vladimir Putin came to power at the beginning of 2000. The results are clear: In its Press Freedom Index 2006, Reporters Without Borders ranked Russia 147 of the 168 countries it examined.

While one can argue about whether there was real press freedom during the Yeltsin era, there was at least a variety of opinions expressed in the media. Then there were many voices critical of Kremlin policy. Today the authorities have chased most alternative points of view from the broadcast and central print media, leaving some freedom in the regional media and the Internet. But even in these areas the ability to speak frankly is increasingly under threat.

The attack on the media is part of a much larger crackdown on the business community, voter rights, non-governmental organizations, and other freedoms that Russians were just beginning to sample after the collapse of Communism. Unfortunately for Russia, the suppression of the media will ultimately undermine the capacity of the state by depriving it of the very information that it needs to rule effectively.

Taboo Topics

Russian journalists who can survive in the current system know what the limits are. The key taboo topics are corruption among the elite and Chechnya, particularly the abuses by the Russian troops and pro-Moscow Chechens, according to Alexei Venediktov, chief editor of Ekho Moskvy, a radio station whose journalists express a wide variety of viewpoints. Like Politkovskaya, Paul Klebnikov may have been looking into corruption in Chechnya before being murdered in July 2004. On October 16, the authorities shut down the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society, a Nizhny Novgorod-based non-governmental organization, that published an on-line newspaper considered to be one of the few reliable sources of information from Chechnya.

By maintaining tight control over media coverage, the Kremlin has learned that it can minimize the fallout from events beyond its control, as Masha Lipman has pointed out. For example, there is little public analysis of the hostage-taking tragedy at Beslan and therefore few consequences for the country's leaders. Broadcasters have essentially ignored the topic, while only relatively minor publications with small audiences have sought to investigate the conditions under which so many of the hostages died. In contrast to these problematic areas, generally acceptable topics for the authorities include foreign affairs, sports, entertainment, and business.

Watching TV

The various central television networks are by far the most important information providers in Russian society: 85 percent of Russians claim to use central television as a key source of information, according to an October poll by the Kremlin-friendly VTsIOM polling agency. This figure increased from 76 percent over the course of a year.

Given the enormous role television plays in Russian

society, it is not surprising that it was one of the first targets in Putin's campaign to reassert state authority. At the beginning of his presidency, Putin clashed with Boris Berezovsky and removed his control of ORT, Russia's most important national network, now called Channel One. Then he forced oligarch Vladimir Gusinsky to flee the country and his NTV network, then one of the most critical of authorities, passed into the hands of Gazprom in 2001. At the time, the government described the transfer as a purely business operation since the television network had extensive debts to the natural gas monopoly. However, the political implications were clear. The journalists who were responsible for NTV's coverage were forced out of the station and tried to set up new networks in the form of TV-6 and TV5, but were ultimately driven from the air in 2003. Under Oleg Dobrodeyev, Russian Television (RTR), the second most important state-owned broadcaster, set up a unified network of 80 regional radio and television companies that present a single message from Moscow. By 2003, the Kremlin had established control over national television.

The Russian state now either owns or controls the five most important Russian television networks, Channel One, Russian Television, TV-Center, NTV, and Ren-TV. Of these the first four devote about 90 percent of their political news time to covering the activities of the authorities, almost invariably in positive or neutral terms, according to monitoring performed by the Center for Journalism in Extreme Circumstances in March 2006. These broadcasters devoted 4 percent of their political coverage or less to the opposition, and these broadcasts were generally negative. Only Ren-TV was slightly different, devoting 19 percent of its political news time to the opposition and providing more balanced coverage of both the authorities and the opposition. The study concluded by pointing out that "Our data show that the majority of the media we studied frequently do not give Russians various points of view on specific topics. The media do not serve as a forum for exchanging opinions, public debates, confrontation, investigations, and commentaries which could provide the public with informed, analytical, and well-considered discussion of political topics and the state authorities." In short, the Russian media do not perform the functions required of them in a democracy.

The national networks are not news outlets, but propaganda providers, according to Igor Yakovenko, the secretary of the Russian Union of Journalists. The television news does not reflect reality, but creates a parallel universe, he said. In cases where it is not clear what the Kremlin line is, the networks are often silent.

For example, network commentators had little to say about the abrupt resignation of Procurator General Vladimir Ustinov and what it meant for Russian politics on the day that he resigned in June. At the time, Ustinov's departure was seemingly one of the most important events of the year given the few personnel changes under Putin, so the lack of commentary was strange. Without straightforward guidance, the usual talking heads were at a loss.

In fact, there is nothing spontaneous on the national networks. Since 2004, all talk shows are pre-recorded and unwanted comments are deleted before the show is aired.

More television stations are expected to begin nationwide broadcasts before the 2007–2008 election cycle begins. But all will represent an official point of view. If there is a dramatic split within the elite, each side will have its own station. The St. Petersburg channel, TV5, considered to be close to First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and a potential Putin successor, already has such a license, and Zvezda army television, controlled by Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov, another potential successor, is expected to win the rights for national broadcasts later this year.

Crackdown on the Press

After imposing state control over the national television networks, the authorities moved on to the central print media. With the sale of *Kommersant* this year, Kremlin-friendly companies have now taken over the key newspapers in Russia that provided a non-state point of view. *Kommersant*, with a relatively small print run of 115,000 copies and a convenient website, was well respected for its coverage of business and political news that was often critical of the Kremlin. At the end of August, Alisher Usmanov, the owner of numerous steel companies and president of Gazprominvestholding, a 100 percent subsidiary of Gazprom, purchased the paper. Usmanov ranks no. 25 *Forbes'* list of richest Russians with an estimated fortune of \$3.1 billion. He is thought to be close to Medvedev, the presidential contender who is also the chairman of Gazprom's board of directors.

Berezovsky, now living in London, owned the paper from 1999 until February 2006, when he sold it to his business partner Badri Patarkatsishvili, who resides in Georgia. Both Berezovsky and Patarkatsishvili are wanted in Russia. Shortly after Usmanov bought the paper, Editor Vladislav Borodulin resigned and other journalists have begun leaving the paper. The new editor is Andrei Vasilyev, who had served as editor from 1999 to summer 2005, when he went to launch *Kommersant's* Ukrainian edition.

The purchase of Kommersant is following a model that has become well tested in Russia: Gazprom or businessmen friendly to the Kremlin purchase a newspaper and the publication soon stops providing cutting-edge reporting that is critical of the authorities. When Gazprom took over *Izvestiya* in 2005, the once respected newspaper slowly declined and today is considered to be more of a tabloid than an independent news outlet. Other papers that have been taken over in recent years include *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, *Novye izvestiya*, and *Moskovskiy novosti*. In 2001, Gazprom took over *Segodnya*, once the crusading paper of Gusinsky's Media Most empire, and closed it down. The gas giant also fired the staff of the newsmagazine *Itogi. Obshchaya gazeta* disappeared in 2002. Currently, Vladimir Potanin's Prof-Media is reportedly preparing to sell *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, the most popular paper in the country with a readership of 8.4 million, most likely to Gazprom.

There are only a few non-state controlled papers left on the Russian Market. *Vedomosti*, which is owned by foreigners, including the Finnish Independent Media Sanoma Magazines, Wall Street Journal, and Financial Times. The paper mainly focuses on business stories. Papers like *Gazeta*, owned by Vladimir Lisin's Novolipetsk Metallurgical Plant, and *Vremya Novostei*, thought to be tied to Aleksandr Voloshin, the chairman of the board of Russia's electricity monopoly and the former Kremlin chief of staff, are considered to be relatively independent, but have small readerships and tiny advertising bases.

Politkovskaya's *Novaya gazeta* seems to be expanding its reach. Its circulation has risen over the last three years from 130,000 to 170,000, putting it well ahead of competitors like *Gazeta* and *Vremya Novostei*. Former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and billionaire Duma member Alexander Lebedev purchased a 49 percent stake in the paper in June to support its policy line.

Of the major media outlets, the radio station Ekho Moskvy is unique in that it is owned by Gazprom but its journalists manage to maintain an independent line. Editor Vendiktov claims that his audience has grown by 20 percent over the last year.

Regional Media

Regional and local publications are generally beholden to regional and local governments for subsidies and therefore have to make sure that they do not offend their political sponsors. Such governments spend millions of dollars a year on these publications.

Nevertheless, there are examples of excellent journalists and publications working in the regions.

For example, the newspaper *Vecherniy Krasnotur'insk*, edited by Natalya Kalinina, was the first to report on the disfiguring hazing that Private Andrei Sychoy suffered during his military service. After *Vecherniy Krasnotur'insk*, which publishes in Sychoy's hometown, began reporting on this story, the national media picked up the cause and Sychoy's mistreatment became a major scandal in Russia, shining an unwelcome light on the military's failure to reform, according to an article on the regional media by Maria Eismont.

Paying the Piper

The government is clearly getting ready to use its control of the media during the 2007/2008 campaign cycle. In the draft budget for 2007, the amount of money set aside for the media will increase almost 50 percent to 18.2 billion rubles (\$680 million), up from 12.6 billion in 2006, according to a recent report in *Nezavisimaya gazeta*. The specific figures for the media will be discussed in the third reading of the budget set for the second part of November.

Beyond state subsidies, some media have been able to generate a lot of income on their own. Naturally, these money flows have caught the eyes of the authorities. On July 31, President Putin issued a decree that puts the Federal Security Service (FSB) in charge of securing critically important sites in Russia, including television. The FSB has its people working in the media business and will have extensive control over the broadcasters' content and financial flows, an "informed source" told *Nezavisimaya gazeta*. The financial flows are particularly attractive since last year broadcasters made an estimated \$3 billion.

Legislating a Tame Media

The authorities are increasingly using the courts to exert pressure on journalists. The Union of Journalists' Yakovenko said that his organization receives about 10 complaints a month from journalists under pressure. Russian legislation now contains many prohibitions against slandering or insulting the authorities. In July, the president signed legislation that makes insulting a government official in the performance of his duties an act of "extremism," exposing the offending journalist to the possibility of a long jail sentence. With ever greater frequency, the courts are deciding cases against journalists in favor of bureaucrats in cases of defamation. In the 1990s, there were fewer than 10 such criminal cases. Now the number is as high as 45 per year, according to the World Association of Newspapers. In advanced democracies, civil, not criminal, courts deal with such cases.

Safety Last

The courts are not necessarily the greatest menace that journalists have to worry about. Russia is the third most dangerous country in the world for journalists, following only Iraq and Algeria, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). Including Politkovskaya, the CPJ lists thirteen journalists who were killed apparently by paid assassins in Russia since the beginning of 2000. The authorities have not been able to identify the murderers in any of the cases, according to Oleg Panfilov, the director of the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations and the CPJ.

Before Politkovskaya's death, the murder of Paul Klebnikov in July 2004 was one of the most well known cases in the west. In May a jury acquitted three men who had been on trial for committing that crime. The procurator-general's office then announced that it planned to file an appeal.

Beyond facing the possibility of death, many journalists in Russia simply are pushed out of their jobs. Prominent examples include television anchor Leonid

Parfyonov, newspaper editor Raf Shakirov, and magazine editor Sergei Parkhomenko. They have either left the profession or gone to work in outlets with smaller audiences.

No News Is Bad News

The Kremlin's crackdown on the free media demonstrates the paranoia of its leaders and their fear of society. Rather than addressing Russia's problems, the country's top politicians have decided that it is simply easier to stop talking about them.

Such tactics are doomed to failure. To rule effectively and over the long-term, leaders must know what the reaction is to their policies. Without a free media to discuss trends and opinions in society, the leadership will have difficulty knowing what the population is thinking and doing. The result will be that they adopt unpopular policies that sooner or later will summon a powerful anti-system opposition. Accordingly, Putin's media policies are likely to have the opposite of the effect intended.

About the author

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Further Reading

- Reporters Without Borders, Press Freedom Index 2006, http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php?id_rubrique=639
- Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations, "Pervyi otchet ob osveshchenii rossiiskoi politicheskoi zhizni v izbrannykh SMI," April 27, 2006, <http://www.memo98.cjes.ru/?p=3&sm2=on&reports=200603>
- Mariya Olegovna Eismont, "Est' li zhizn' na Marse, ili Nezavismye SMI v Rossiiskikh regionakh," *Otechestvennye zapiski*, no. 6, 2005, http://magazines.russ.ru/oz/2005/6/2005_6_19-pr.html

Documentation

Worldwide Press Freedom Index 2006 (Selected Countries)

No.	Country	Score
1	Finland	0,50
23	Germany	5,50
27	United Kingdom	6,50
53	United States of America	13,00
58	Poland	14,00
105	Ukraine	26,50
147	Russia	52,50
168	North Korea	109,00

Source: http://www.rsf.org/article.php?id_article=19388 24 October 2006