

“The problem with today’s media in Russia is not just that the Kremlin controls national television, but also that those publications that remain uncontrolled do not make a difference. . . .”

Constrained or Irrelevant: The Media in Putin’s Russia

MASHA LIPMAN

The Soviet Union had an enormous number of newspapers, but no independent media. Objective reporting, working with a source, investigative journalism, news itself were unfamiliar concepts. Competition, advertising, profitability were unheard of. Holding the government accountable on behalf of the public was not an issue: the Soviet press was an arm of the state, and it preached to the public on the state’s behalf.

One of Lenin’s pronouncements that adorned many a street and square of Soviet cities proclaimed that “a newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and agitator, but also a collective organizer.” And sure enough through the decades of communism the Soviet press—and later television—fulfilled that mission. Every word printed or broadcast for a mass audience was to be authorized by Communist party censors; all periodicals and broadcasting agencies (like all property) were owned by the state; all important appointments had to be approved by the Communist party. The party produced and disseminated ideologically appropriate opinions on every issue, and even provided ideologically correct wording.

In the late 1980s the press started to open up, and soon thereafter the era of preliminary state censorship came to an end. This was the beginning of revolutionary change: in 1990, a year before communism collapsed and the Soviet Union followed suit, the first nongovernment periodicals in 70 years began to take shape. When Boris Yeltsin, the first Russian president, took the helm, private mass media and professional modern-day press and television not controlled by the state came into existence.

Less than a decade later the Russian government undertook its first major crackdown on press freedom. In the spring of 2000, within days after President Vladimir Putin’s inauguration, the government launched a campaign to take influential media under state control. The campaign began with a raid by masked security men on the offices of Media-MOST, the largest privately owned media group; three years later all national television networks were controlled by the state. In recent years the Kremlin’s control over media has tightened further.

Compared to the Soviet era, today’s Russian media still enjoy considerable freedom. They are predominantly commercial institutions, and even on state-controlled national television constraints apply almost exclusively to politically sensitive coverage. The days of total prepublication censorship have securely become a thing of the past. Yet, if one looks back five years ago rather than twenty, the picture is of a Russian media scene significantly constrained.

TAKING CONTROL

In 1994–1995, at the time of the Russian government’s first war in Chechnya, reports by the privately owned television network NTV helped to shape public opinion in much the same way as American media did during the Vietnam War. The atrocities and horrors of the Chechen War entered the homes of the Russian people as those of the Vietnam War seeped into the living rooms of Americans, and before long this yielded a similar effect: the war grew so unpopular that President Yeltsin had to stop it—otherwise he ran no chance of winning reelection for a second term in 1996.

Such a result today would be inconceivable. With all national television networks tightly controlled by the Kremlin, nothing that government authorities deem “inappropriate,” unexpected, or unpleasant may appear on the television screens of the major

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networks. In the summer of 2004 the last live TV political talk show was shut down, as well as the last political satirical show. Technically the top manager of the channel made the decision, but there was little doubt he was acting on orders from the government. The Kremlin keeps “stop lists” of individuals (political opponents, uncompromised critics) who are barred from national television. The coverage of sensitive issues is thoroughly filtered to ensure that the picture of Russian life delivered to viewers is not politically disturbing or provocative.

In their recent book, *Kremlin Rising: Vladimir Putin's Russia and the End of Revolution*, Washington Post Moscow correspondents Peter Baker and Susan Glasser cite an insider's description of how government control over television coverage is implemented: “The Kremlin convened meetings each Friday with the top television directors at which Putin aide Vladislav Surkov, Kremlin consultant Gleb Pavlovsky, and others handed out weekly talking points. Over time, the agenda became nakedly political, aimed at supporting Putin and his political party. . . . At each session, a written agenda was handed out with the week's expected news topics and recommended approaches.”

By the time he emerged as Russia's president, Putin was well aware of the political power of television. In late 1999 Boris Berezovsky, a businessman, media tycoon, and political operator, used his television channel to destroy Putin's political rivals. A sophisticated smearing campaign significantly reduced their popularity, thus clearing Putin's path to the presidency. After this experience it was only natural for Putin to desire that a tool as powerful as television rest under Kremlin control and not in the hands of business tycoons whose loyalties he could not trust. Print press was of much less importance: the distribution of mainstream dailies and weeklies is confined to a few large urban centers (mostly Moscow) and their circulation rarely exceeds 100,000 copies. National television networks reach over 90 percent of the Russian population of over 140 million people.

ACTS OF DISLOYALTY

Bringing the television networks fully into submission proved a complicated and time-consuming task. In the meantime, Russia lived through a variety of dramatic developments and crises, and at least

some of the journalists covering them were driven by professional instincts developed during the earlier postcommunist years: they repeatedly sought to unveil what the government was anxious to conceal.

Such was the case of the submarine *Kursk* catastrophe in August 2000, which took the lives of all 118 sailors aboard. The media exposed officials' lies and cover-ups while a furious and frustrated Putin lashed out at journalists, blaming them for subverting the Russian army and navy. Another example was the October 2002 attack at a Moscow theater in which about 900 people were taken hostage by Chechen terrorists. A botched rescue operation that used knockout gas but failed to provide adequate and timely medical help left 130 hostages dead.

Journalists did their best to investigate these events, while Putin accused them of cynical profit-seeking: they are taking advantage of the tragedy, he

said, in order to attract more public attention and thus more advertising money. Shortly afterward, the top manager of the television network whose coverage especially enraged Putin

was replaced by a loyal director, to whom the Kremlin's instructions were a much higher priority than the ethics of the journalistic profession.

Each act of “disloyalty” by the media served as additional proof of the need to keep television firmly under control, in the government's view, and the Kremlin has worked to tighten the constraints. By the time the hostage-taking tragedy at a Beslan school occurred in September 2004 the Kremlin was fully protected against the detrimental effects of professional journalism, at least as far as national television was concerned. As soon as the storming of the school was over, so was television coverage of one of the world's most horrible terrorist attacks, which took the lives of more than 300 people, most of them children. There were no survivors' accounts, no stories of desperate people who lost loved ones, no independent experts' analysis, and no public discussion whatsoever.

Indeed, national television has become a tool for maintaining Putin's popularity and the political dominance of his administration. Tame television certainly came in handy for the past election cycle (parliamentary elections in December 2003 and Putin's reelection in the spring of 2004). Secure control of national networks ensured that campaign

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coverage was fully in favor of the pro-Kremlin party *Edinaya Rossiya* (United Russia). International observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe evaluated the campaign as generally free but unfair and accused the state-controlled media of showing bias toward pro-presidential parties and the incumbent president.

There is no doubt that the forthcoming election cycle in 2007–2008 will see the Kremlin take full advantage of its control over television. The ruling elite is anxious to preserve the political status quo, and television is invaluable when it comes to clearing the political scene of genuine competition—granting fully uncritical coverage to the incumbents, while barring and smearing the undesired candidates.

LIMITED ACCESS

Control instead of competition has been the trademark of Putin's government. Under his tenure decision making has been concentrated in the Kremlin inner circle and fully shut off from the public eye. The Kremlin strongly limits access to “public” briefings and never has them televised. The Kremlin spokesman is not a familiar face, except for a small group of trusted and loyal journalists included in the so-called Kremlin pool.

Putin himself holds one press conference for Russian journalists a year, with over 1,000 reporters from all over the country. This is more a gala public relations event than a format for asking pressing policy questions. In fact, asking urgent policy questions of the Kremlin has become an extinct genre in today's Russian journalism. As a result, decision makers enjoy full unaccountability. To cite just one example: when FSB (Russian state security agency) chief Nikolai Patrushev appeared on television for the first time after the terrorist attack in Beslan (this was about one month later), the interviewing television reporter did not ask him a single concrete question about the episode. He would not even inquire where Patrushev was at the time. (Rumors had it that he did arrive in North Ossetia—the Russian republic in which Beslan is located—but never appeared in public so as to avoid responsibility for what was emerging as a horrible tragedy.) It should come as no surprise that at Putin's yearly press conference in late 2004, the issue of Beslan was never raised. The atmosphere in today's Russia suggests there was likely no need to instruct the journalists not to ask this question—they know better than to antagonize the president.

With no autonomous, private ownership of national television networks, self-censorship among journalists has become pervasive. As for the top television managers, they are willing and skilled promoters of Kremlin policies who eagerly and creatively cooperate with Kremlin aides.

MEDIA WEAKNESS

In the late 1980s, at the time of perestroika, there was tremendous enthusiasm for free words. Print runs of periodicals skyrocketed. Press articles stirred passionate public debates. Gradually, a liberated press helped the Russian people shed their long-abiding fear of the state and eventually free their country of communist oppression.

President Yeltsin did not interfere with the free press, even if at times it caused him serious trouble (for instance, when media coverage of the first Chechen war reduced his popularity and forced him to sign a humiliating agreement with Chechen leaders). Yeltsin seemed to genuinely value press freedom, in part because it was one of the democratic liberties he secured for Russia, and also because liberal journalists were his natural allies in the fight against fierce Communist opposition, a struggle that lasted throughout his rule. Even if Yeltsin or some in his inner circle had wanted to restrain freedom of speech, his weakened government most probably would have lacked the capacity to do so.

Unfortunately, although Yeltsin's government did not directly attack press freedom, the fundamental principles that make it possible—just like the principles of other democratic institutions—were compromised during his tenure before they had a chance to take root in the Russian soil. Problematic ownership of media assets, murky business practices, and institutional weakness all helped to erode the foundations of an independent media.

Russia's unprecedented transition from a fully nationalized economy was associated with legal anarchy and get-rich-quick schemes in which the most entrepreneurial and the best connected enriched themselves at state expense. Big businessmen, media tycoons included, were engaged in murky relations with government officials, thus gaining access to resources such as lucrative contracts, exemptions, or easy loans. Media owners may have been powerful and independent, but their autonomy was shaky: it lasted only until the government gained enough strength.

The flaws of state institutions, the prevalence of secret collusion over open political competition, the large-scale lobbying unregulated by law, and the

growth of corruption all had an effect on the activities of mass media during the 1990s. Paid-for articles and advertising disguised as news became common in the news media. So did the publication of smearing and compromising materials to undermine political and economic rivals. (These materials generally were provided by the “client”; the journalist would make no effort to probe or verify. Among other detrimental effects this practice has undermined the development of professional investigative journalism in Russia.) Of course, these activities were not universal. The best publications, television stations, and journalists retained their passion, curiosity, and ethical principles and perfected their skills. Yet their professional mastery could not address the main problem: the declining credibility of the media and reputation of the journalistic profession. Owners not averse to using their influential outlets to further their own political and business goals caused further damage to the media’s image.

Just like other democratic institutions—the parliament, political parties, the judiciary—mass media tried to fol-

low the time-tested Western models, yet none of them made good progress. Disillusioned with a democracy that failed to meet their expectations of a better life, and abhorring the new rich as well as greedy officials, the Russian people resumed their habitual attitude: a deeply ingrained mistrust of the government and of each other, supported by apathy and cynicism. The mass media failed to evolve as a means of advancing public politics in part because the sphere for vigorous debate was gradually reduced and because few Russians sustained hopes of using the media to hold authorities accountable.

THE KREMLIN’S STRATEGY

The Kremlin did not shrink from seizing advantage. In 2000, however, when Putin and those around him identified the mass media—and first and foremost national television—as a target for expanding state power, Russia still had a variety of actors who defied the central government. Business oligarchs, unruly local governors, and liberal opponents in the parliament remained politically powerful (though not cohesive). The government thus had to act carefully.

The Kremlin did not harass journalists or editors. Attacking individuals armed with weapons as

innocuous as writing skills and a computer could have promoted public sympathy for those persecuted. The Kremlin did not intend to conduct a bloody repression, and harassment of journalists one by one was more likely to encourage than to intimidate them. Instead, the Kremlin went after media owners. Their outright negative public image made them a better target. Besides, they were more vulnerable. All of them were engaged in questionable business practices in the early stages of Russian capitalism; with huge property holdings they stood to lose a lot more, and thus were more easily intimidated. Finally, the television network owners were a tiny group, so pushing them out was a more secure way to take all national television under control.

This was how the Kremlin embarked on a sophisticated campaign against its first media target—Media-MOST. Founded and owned by Vladimir Gusinsky and shaped in the mid-1990s, Media-MOST

was the largest non-government media group. It included a popular radio station, a few high-quality periodicals, and, by far the most important asset, NTV, Rus-

sia’s highest-quality national television network, which was politically influential and enjoyed the public’s affection.

Media-MOST was hugely indebted to the giant gas monopoly Gazprom, in which the state held a large share. The Kremlin targeted Gusinsky in part because he refused to pledge allegiance to Putin during his presidential campaign. Also, his debt to Gazprom made him vulnerable when the gas company’s management, once closely tied with Gusinsky, switched loyalties and abetted the government’s attack on the bold media tycoon.

The campaign combined business litigation with personal intimidation. Gusinsky was threatened with criminal prosecution and even briefly jailed. The public, expectedly, had little sympathy for the media magnate. Neither would the rich and the powerful stand up for him, for fear of falling out with the Kremlin: they realized they were in no way immune to similar troubles. The Kremlin spinmeisters vehemently denied that the campaign against Gusinsky and his media group had anything to do with press freedom and state control over coverage. They did everything in their capacity to persuade the public that this was merely business litigation.

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The campaign took longer than the government expected and turned out to be fairly costly, both in terms of state resources and Russia's image in the West. Yet eventually the Kremlin had its way. Gusinsky was forced to flee the country, and his television network was taken over by the government surrogate Gazprom. Another business and media tycoon, Boris Berezovsky, who controlled Russia's largest national television network, followed Gusinsky's path a short time later.

THE SOUND OF APATHY

The public may have felt sorry for its favorite journalists, some of whom chose to go off the air rather than work under the Kremlin's command, but the protest was not powerful enough and quickly faded away. Although the eviction of the two biggest media tycoons and the takeover of their television networks meant the end of political diversity on television, most Russians did not appear to regard the government's efforts as an infringement on their rights.

After the takeover of two major networks, the Kremlin elite felt more confident in further tightening control over national television. Two attempts to launch nongovernment national television channels proved unsuccessful; both were shut down with little regard to legality and barely any public reaction. As the Kremlin infringed deeper and deeper on the public ground and wiped out all nongovernment national television in Russia, the Russian people easily gave in. Freedom of choice and an alternative to government opinion were not valued: in a national poll conducted in the fall of 2003, 36 percent said increased state control was beneficial for mass media, 25 percent thought it was detrimental, and the rest had no opinion.

Those precious few television journalists whose talent, professional ethics, or political beliefs put them out of tune with the general atmosphere of self-censorship and compliance quit or were fired. Several shows were taken off the air altogether.

If the journalistic community was unhappy about these developments, its reaction remained fairly timid. In 2004 the Russian Television Academy awarded its annual prizes to several non grata journalists and terminated shows; some academy members in a public letter expressed concern about the political censorship of television. They suggested that the letter be read at the award ceremony, but other members would not take the risk. The letter ended up in the low-circulation liberal press. There a couple hundred thousand Russians could see it,

instead of an audience of many millions for the National Television Awards ceremony.

POCKETS OF FREEDOM

While strategically targeting television, the Kremlin left the print press largely alone. Until recently, the government would not bother with minor media outlets: about a dozen mainstream dailies and weeklies, a smaller television channel, a popular radio station, and a few high-quality political websites have maintained liberal and critical editorial lines.

The picture of Russian life that emerges from these outlets is quite different from the one provided by the national television networks. Yet all these outlets remain at the mercy of the Kremlin. With politics under state control, there is no political force or sufficiently powerful public group capable of opposing a crackdown on the remaining nongovernment media, should the ruling elite deem it necessary. Some outlets are especially vulnerable, since they are owned by the same evicted tycoons whose television properties were taken over by the state.

Liberal outlets have small audiences. The largest mainstream daily newspaper, *Izvestia*, has a press run of 250,000; others rarely exceed 100,000. And these runs have not gone up since national television came under tight control—a significant sign of low public interest in liberal media. Declining circulation of high-quality mainstream periodicals may be a worldwide trend, but in Russia, with a population over 140 million, the existing runs are especially low, and the distribution is generally limited to Moscow and a few major urban centers. Some Internet-based publications maintain a liberal and critical editorial line and offer high-quality news and analysis. But the Internet's penetration of the public, though growing fast in recent years, still remains relatively low. (The number of regular users is under 10 percent of the population.)

Meanwhile, the habit of reading newspapers in order to be politically aware is largely lost in Russia. The incredibly high press runs of the perestroika era evaporated as soon as the economic reforms of the early 1990s liberalized prices and newspapers became too expensive for the vast majority of Russians. National distribution systems, which crashed after the collapse of the Soviet Union, have never been properly reestablished, with most periodicals distributed by retail sales rather than subscription. As a result, even *Izvestia* is read by only 2 percent of the national audience and 4 percent of Muscovites. None of the other high-quality mainstream print

media has a national audience of more than 1 or 2 percent.

Since most of the fragmented dailies and weeklies do not pick up each other's stories, even an important news piece creates little public resonance and fails to become a politically significant event. Occasionally, a publication will produce an excellent article disclosing important information, yet the impact is essentially absent.

To provide just a few examples: several years after the *Kursk* submarine disaster, a high-quality weekly (with a circulation of about 60,000) published revealing facts about official inaction during the first hours after the submarine had sunk. There was no response from the public, or military authorities, or from other publications. Similarly, two members of parliamentary commissions investigating the Beslan tragedy spoke to the same weekly, reporting outrageous facts about the storming of the school. This disclosure also caused no response. And a business daily, *Vedomosti*, exposed the financial intricacies of the purchase by a state-run oil company, Rosneft, of Yugansneftegaz, the most valuable asset of the convicted tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky's oil company Yukos. President Putin had earlier referred to this transaction as

purely a market deal in full compliance with the law. Yet, according to the *Vedomosti* story, it involved unlawful use of government funds. No government official bothered to deny the information that challenged the president's credibility.

EMPTY SPACE

The problem with today's media in Russia is not just that the Kremlin controls national television, but also that those publications that remain uncontrolled do not make a difference, since they operate in a virtually empty public space. The real public space is that of national TV, where Kremlin loyalists shape the news.

Even so, the Kremlin more recently seems to be extending its control over smaller-circulation media. It orchestrated a change of ownership in *Izvestia* and a television company with a relatively small audience and a liberal editorial line. For the time being, the coverage and editorial perspectives of both outlets remain unchanged. But with their new, fully loyal owners, the Kremlin may be confident that both will prove useful if and when the Kremlin might need to use them for its political purposes. The most obvious purpose is ensuring the desired outcome in the next election campaign. ■

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