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The Russian Media

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Fig. 17.1 Russians watch a televised broadcast by President Vladimir Putin, September 2005. Credit: Denis Sinyakov/AFP via Getty Images

This chapter went to press on the eve of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. With the war came unprecedented censorship and the closure of most of what remained of Russia's independent media – an atrocity that abets a catastrophe.

We dedicate this chapter to those brave citizens, professionals and amateurs alike, who at great risk continue to provide truthful information to the Russian public.

Abstract

From Gorbachev through Yeltsin to Putin, Russia's media landscape has undergone profound change since the late 1980s. The centralized Soviet system of propaganda

collapsed, to be replaced by freewheeling broadcast media that were not fully independent of the oligarchs who owned or controlled them. Vladimir Putin brought these media under his control after assuming the presidency in 2000, but for some time he was content to let information circulate in other arenas. That changed with his return to the presidency in 2012. Since then, and especially since widespread protests in 2011 and 2012, state control of the media has been consolidated and extended in various directions, most especially online. Under Putin, new media have emerged, but they too have been subjected to various sanctions and restrictions. The Russian state has for now perfected its control of the media, with uncertain consequences for the stability of Putin's rule.

17.1 Introduction: Russia's Changing Media Landscape

The story of media in postcommunist Russia is a tale of escape from state control, followed by the gradual reemergence of that control under Vladimir Putin even as media technology evolved. During Russia's liberalization in the late 1980s and early 1990s, privately owned news organizations emerged, though often these served to promote their owners' political and business interests rather than the interests of a free society. This flawed independence helped to pave the way for the reestablishment of media control in the 2000s, when Vladimir Putin came to power and the government began to seize control of the media – first the broadcast media from which most Russians learned the news, and then a much broader array of media outlets, including in the new digital economy.

After two decades of Putin's rule, the mainstream Russian media – almost all television stations and many prominent newspapers and online media – have been placed firmly under the Kremlin's control, with only a few independent news outlets remaining. Nonetheless, the government's command of the media today is a far cry from Soviet times, when news organizations were all part of an enormous, centralized propaganda machine. Putin's regime has neither the need nor the capacity to censor every word that is uttered or written – not least because of growing **internet penetration** and the proliferation of social media. The Kremlin can make it difficult to access **independent media**, but it cannot silence critical voices completely, and even state-owned media must compete for viewers and advertising revenue. To a degree difficult to imagine under communist rule, curious and active citizens – including especially young Russians, who grew up with the Internet – are still able to acquire multiple perspectives on any unfolding political story.

17.2 The Soviet Era and Gorbachev's Reforms

For seven decades, the Soviet government and the ruling **Communist Party of the Soviet Union** prioritized reshaping society and creating a “new Soviet man” who would be, among other things, loyal to the party and infused with Marxist-Leninist ideology (Hoffmann 2011). In pursuit of this aim, all news and information made available to citizens was carefully filtered. The party and government ministries controlled all media in the country, from central television to local newspapers. A Soviet joke ran: “In Russia, we have two channels on TV. Channel One is propaganda. Channel Two is a KGB officer who tells you to turn back to Channel One” (Popson 1985). By the 1980s, the number of Soviet television channels had increased to six, but the political views they promoted were coordinated by the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party. This centralized control made it impossible for critical or ideologically inconsistent news stories to reach a wide audience. Information from abroad was typically blocked: Foreign radio stations, such as Radio Liberty, were often jammed (Nelson 1997), and only selected Western books and movies were allowed (Roth-Ey 2012).

In the late 1980s, many Russians tasted media freedom for the first time, as Soviet leader **Mikhail Gorbachev's** reforms began to chip away at central party control. Gorbachev declared a policy of *glasnost* (openness), which held that Soviet citizens could criticize the government's shortcomings and debate its policies. This led to a relaxation of censorship and the beginning of real political discussion in the national media, as well as the emergence of tabloid-style journalism (McNair 1991). Popular media outlets such as *Moskovskie Novosti*, *Ogonek*, and *Literaturnaia Gazeta* published critical pieces on Stalin's repressions, the state of the Soviet economy, and other contentious issues.

The overwhelming majority of Russian media organizations were at this stage still owned and controlled by the state, and certain politically sensitive topics were still censored. Nonetheless, by 1990, Western media were allowed to circulate more freely, and vibrant commercial newspapers such as *Kommersant* and *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* and radio stations such as Ekho Moskvy were established. The Soviet state also began to relax control over television, once the pillar of the communist propaganda machine.

These changes played a key role in the anti-Gorbachev putsch of 1991, which foundered in part on the failure of the plotters – a group of Communist hardliners – to establish monopoly control of the airwaves. Even as the State Committee on the State of Emergency ordered state media to broadcast pro-putsch messages – an order that was only partially fulfilled, as central state television gave voice to the opposition – protest rallies and other events on the ground were covered by Ekho Moskvy and Voice of America. The failure of the putsch deprived the Communist Party of its

remaining legitimacy and accelerated the disintegration of the Soviet state, culminating in the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991. With the demise of the Soviet state, the former central television channels became separate television stations, some of which were subsequently privatized and commercialized.

17.3 Yeltsin and the Oligarchs: The Media Wars of the 1990s

Boris Yeltsin, the first president of independent Russia, found himself faced with a vibrant, if immature, media market. In this new environment, media – especially television – were often used as weapons in the struggle for power and money. Many commercial television stations, newspapers, and magazines were owned or controlled by “oligarchs” – politically powerful businesspeople who did not hesitate to order their employees to vilify business competitors or political enemies (Burrett 2011, 78). In 1996, for example, the television media circled their wagons around Yeltsin to prevent a return to power by the Communists. In 1997, in contrast, media under the control of two of the oligarchs – Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky – attacked the government in retaliation for awarding shares in telecommunications giant Svyazinvest to a rival. In 1999, the presidential fortunes of former prime minister Yevgeny Primakov, a formidable and experienced politician who was initially one of the favorites in the race, were thwarted through a series of malicious television reports. Such instrumental and cynical use of journalism helped to drive Russians’ skepticism about the media, which continues to this day (Roudakova 2017).

Throughout the 1990s, Russian journalists enjoyed substantial freedom to criticize government officials, something they could have only imagined in Soviet times. Vladimir Gusinsky’s television station NTV, for example, was critical of the First Chechen War, waged during Yeltsin’s presidency, with coverage of military and civilian casualties and interviews with Chechen separatists, and NTV’s reports on corruption by high-level government officials extended beyond the Svyazinvest episode. In a similar fashion, the newspaper *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, then controlled by Berezovsky, reported in 1999 on embezzlement and fraud in the Russian Central Bank and other federal agencies, using information from internal government documents.

As a result of such critical reporting, Yeltsin’s relationship with news organizations became increasingly tense. The collapse of the Russian state, however, left Yeltsin with less control over media than his Soviet predecessors had possessed, and Yeltsin himself may have been personally disinclined to reimpose that control. Whatever the combination of opportunity and motive, the president and his administration did occasionally attempt to pressure news organizations (Hoffman 1999), but Yeltsin refrained from more dramatic moves such as shutting down or censoring media outlets.

17.4 Putin and the Reemergence of Media Control

The Russian government's perception of such criticism shifted substantially during the first presidential term of Vladimir Putin, Yeltsin's designated successor. Putin emerged as a political actor during the 1990s, and he witnessed at first hand the powerful role that the media could play in political battles. For the new president, independent media were not an irritation but an existential threat.

Broadcast television had for decades been the most influential medium in Russia, given the robust infrastructure built during the Soviet period and the underdevelopment of cable networks and independent print media. This influence played a key role in the 1999 parliamentary elections, over which Putin presided as prime minister. For essentially random reasons related to geography and the placement of television transmitters, the independent television network NTV was available in some parts of the country but not others. The pro-Kremlin Unity party's vote share was about nine percentage points lower in areas where citizens were able to receive NTV's signal than in those where they were not (Enikolopov, Petrova, and Zhuravskaya 2011), a likely consequence of NTV's greater criticism of the government and the coverage it provided to opposition politicians.

Criticism of the government on the airwaves continued into the early months of Putin's presidency. Just before Putin's election as president in 2000, NTV's satirical show *Puppets* portrayed him as an evil gnome from a fairytale. Another major television station, ORT – formally owned by the state but in practice controlled by Berezovsky – had initially supported Putin's bid for power, but after a falling out between Putin and Berezovsky in the spring of 2000, the station took a more independent stance. In the first major crisis of Putin's presidency, the sinking of the nuclear submarine *Kursk* in August 2000, ORT (as well as NTV) was openly critical, blaming the president for the deaths of the 118 crew members on board.

In actions that both preceded and followed these events, the new presidential administration made several decisive moves to restrict independent journalism. In May 2000, less than a week after Putin's inauguration, Vladimir Gusinsky's offices were searched, and a month later the oligarch himself was arrested and charged with fraud. Subsequently released and allowed to flee to Spain, Gusinsky lost control of his media assets, including NTV, which were acquired by the state-owned energy giant Gazprom. In the same year, the government initiated criminal proceedings against Berezovsky, forcing him to leave Russia and sell his stake in ORT to Roman Abramovich, an oligarch with established loyalty to Putin; ORT was renamed Channel One soon after its takeover by the government. Another of Berezovsky's television stations, TV-6, which had been highly critical of Putin's government, was shut down in 2001 on the formal grounds that the company's assets had fallen below its authorized capital.

In a not uncommon view, one observer called the takeover of NTV the beginning of the “prolonged strangulation” of Russian media; another believed it to be “the date of the funeral of the hopes for a new Russia” (both cited in Ennis 2011). Throughout the broadcast media, many leading journalists and media managers either left or were forced out, to be replaced by more loyal personnel. The loss of independence meant dramatic changes to news coverage. Tina Burrett describes the censorship practices newly instituted at Channel One: “The editor-in-chief personally watches all reports about President Putin and he alone decides what to cut . . . The editor-in-chief receives directions on what to show and what not to show from [the] director general . . . [who] receives his orders directly from the Kremlin Press Office” (Burrett 2011, 76). The Kremlin also provided TV managers with so-called stop lists of politicians or public figures who were not to be invited as guests or covered in the news. At least on television, the freewheeling – if often commercially biased – reporting of the 1990s was over.

17.5 The Limits of Media Control

Russia’s backsliding into media authoritarianism did not, however, mean a return to Soviet-era censorship, when both television and the press were heavily constrained by the directives of the Communist Party, and their reporting reflected the official Soviet ideology. On the contrary, throughout the early Putin era, Russian media maintained some degree of pluralism (Oates 2007). Whereas television stations were put under the direct or indirect control of the government, many other media organizations remained relatively independent. As Putin himself stated in an interview with the US network NBC News in July 2006, with more than 3,500 radio and television companies and in excess of 40,000 print outlets, the Kremlin “could not control them all even if we wanted to” (Putin 2006).

In his premise, Putin was almost certainly correct. Putin was clearly willing to do what it took to hold on to power, but he was not interested in fundamentally changing society. During his first two terms in office, it seemed sufficient to seize the “commanding heights” of the media industry (Gehlbach 2010). First and foremost, this meant controlling the national television networks that provided most Russians with news about their country and the rest of the world.

Below the commanding heights, the Kremlin’s control of the Russian media was therefore incomplete. What is more, some segments of the media market witnessed a substantial increase in professionalism during the first decade of Putin’s rule. Several influential business newspapers and magazines emerged and became known for their journalistic integrity and the quality of their investigative reporting. That list included the business dailies *Kommersant* (owned until 2006 by the exiled oligarch Boris Berezovsky) and *Vedomosti* (initially a joint venture of the

Financial Times and the *Wall Street Journal*), as well as *Forbes Russia* and *BusinessWeek Russia*. The rise of independent business journalism was propelled by fast economic growth during Putin's first two presidential terms. A surge in entrepreneurial activity and in living standards created a robust advertising market that, in turn, supported professional journalism – between 2000 and 2008, print and radio advertising in Russia grew sixfold (ACAR 2019) – though this greater independence may have paradoxically created an incentive for the state to eventually seize control (Gehlbach and Sonin 2014).

Several other independent news outlets grew in popularity and influence. *Novaya Gazeta*, a newspaper founded in 1993 with the help of former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, soon turned into a prominent investigative outlet that reported on the war in Chechnya, government corruption, police brutality, and money-laundering, among other topics. The high-quality news magazine *New Times* played a similar role. Ekho Moskvyy, a radio station formerly owned by Vladimir Gusinsky alongside NTV, became a household name among liberal-minded and pro-Western Russians, even though its majority shareholder was the state-owned Gazprom. (The station turned a profit, which may have helped to guarantee its independence, and the Kremlin may have valued the window on the urban intelligentsia that Ekho Moskvyy provided.)

Finally, the emergence and development of new independent media were aided by the proliferation of the Internet (known colloquially in Russia as the RuNet). In 2000, when Putin became president, only 2 percent of the Russian population had internet access. By 2010, this had increased to 43 percent (ITU 2021). This new audience was younger, wealthier, and eager for news. The first to reap the benefits of this interest in online news were several media outlets established in the late 1990s and early 2000s, including Lenta.ru, Rbc.ru, and Gazeta.ru. Initially little more than news aggregators, by the early 2010s these outlets, alongside new entrants such as cable news station Dozhd, which attracted viewers with its extensive coverage of antigovernment protests in 2011, were putting substantial emphasis on original news reporting and investigative work.

17.6 Pressure on Independent Media

Although many Russian media remained private in the Putin era, they were often not free of Kremlin influence. In important cases, the Kremlin encouraged loyal oligarchs to take ownership. Such indirect control allowed the government to deny its involvement in editorial decisions, even as the new owners acted as de facto agents of the state.

In 2006, for example, Alisher Usmanov, a billionaire born in Uzbekistan who is best known in the West as a major shareholder of Arsenal Football Club in the UK,

purchased the company that published *Kommersant*, replacing its top management. At first Usmanov appeared not to interfere with journalists' work, but over time the newspaper's coverage became less edgy and more favorable to the government. Journalists who covered politics with a critical eye were eventually fired; those who remained learned to be more careful when writing about the Kremlin or the opposition.

A similar story concerns Yury Kovalchuk, a close friend of Vladimir Putin. In 2008, Kovalchuk created the National Media Group (NMG), which quickly became one of Russia's largest media companies (Lipman 2014, 183). By late 2021, NMG had acquired control of four major national television stations, dozens of cable channels, and several prominent newspapers. Such a media conglomerate could not have emerged without the support of the Kremlin, and NMG responded in kind. Previously independent news outlets adopted a more propagandistic orientation, closely mirroring the political coverage of state-run television stations such as Channel One.

Independent media were also subjected to economic and legal pressure. Such tactics were on display in the case of Natalia Morar, an investigative journalist for the *New Times*. After reporting in late 2007 on a Kremlin slush fund used to finance political parties, Morar (a Moldovan citizen but permanent Russian resident at the time of the incident) was barred from entering the country, and the magazine's advertisers disappeared overnight (Lipman 2009).

In addition, many independent journalists faced the very real threat of physical violence. Between 1992 and 2021, eighty-two journalists were killed in Russia. The Committee to Protect Journalists suspects government or military officials in at least a third of these deaths (see <https://cpj.org/data>), including the 2006 high-profile killing of *Novaya Gazeta* investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who had reported on human-rights violations during the Second Chechen War and on murders and torture in postwar Chechnya. Although the involvement of state officials could not be proven definitively in most cases, the failure to bring the actual organizers of these crimes to justice created an atmosphere of impunity, such that the threat of death or physical harm remained a constant fear for many investigative journalists.

Russian media managers, especially at the national broadcast networks, learned to walk a fine line, generally echoing the Kremlin's position on issues of the day, while also crafting messages to avoid alienating viewers. It was an old lesson, relearned. Soviet TV professionals understood that unadulterated propaganda is generally ineffective: Viewers realize that they are being fed the party line, and they fall back on whatever they are predisposed to believe (Mickiewicz 2008). Media under state control therefore provide enough real information to keep viewers guessing about the line between fact and fiction. This can be especially effective when high-quality information is scarce. Such was the case during the 2008 Russo-

Georgian War, when Russian viewers were treated to a mix of images of genuine suffering by South Ossetians, whom the Russian government supported in their conflict with the Georgian government, and apparently inflated casualty counts. In contrast, when outside information is readily available, as when external oil price shocks cause the value of the ruble to decline, Russian television media are compelled to report bad news – but try to change the narrative by blaming external actors (Rozenas and Stukal 2019).

To a degree unimaginable during the Soviet period, cable and satellite television, and increasingly the Internet, compete for the public's time. Russian citizens are therefore more likely than were Soviet citizens to change the channel or simply turn off the television if they are dissatisfied with what is being broadcast. This was demonstrated in dramatic fashion after the takeover of NTV in early 2001. With the change in editorial policy and departure of many of the network's veteran journalists, NTV's market share dropped from 17.9 percent in 2000 to 12.6 percent in 2001 (Gehlbach and Sonin 2014). The lesson, which the Kremlin learned the hard way, is that control of the commanding heights may not be sufficient to ensure a captive audience for propaganda. As a result, the state turned to control of other media, as discussed below. In addition, state-media employees worked to make news reports more engaging, producing a hybrid format of propaganda that has been called "agitainment" (Tolz and Teper 2017). To that end, journalists enjoyed at least a measure of creative, though not political, freedom (Schimpfössl and Yablokov 2014) – a situation again reminiscent of the Soviet period, when film directors worked to produce "quality" films that nonetheless conveyed a propaganda message (Belodubrovskaya 2017).

17.7 The (Re)Consolidation of Media Control

The decade since 2012 has seen a tightening of state control over traditional and online media, alongside the growing exclusion of opposition actors from mainstream news. State-sponsored propaganda has largely replaced real news in the federal broadcast media, with news bulletins and talk shows such as Dmitry Kiselev's *Vesti Nedeli* promoting an agenda that extols the virtues of a strong and sovereign Russian state that stands in opposition to so-called Ukrainian fascists and an "immoral" West that promotes homosexuality. Everything – from the Sochi Olympics (hosted by Russia in 2014, the Olympics were trailed by numerous allegations of corruption and widespread evidence of doping that were not reported in state media) to the annexation of Crimea and the ensuing war with Ukraine – is placed into a strategic narrative that emphasizes a powerful yet benevolent "Russian World." Highly staged and ritualistic televised events, such as Putin's annual call-in show *Priamaia Linia* (see Wengle and Evans 2018; Chapman 2021), help convey an

image of competence that forestalls the need for overt repression (Guriev and Treisman 2019, 2020).

Meanwhile, however, independent investigative media and opposition actors have come to rely on digital platforms and networked media to spread alternative narratives about infighting, corruption, and human rights violations among Russian officials. December 2011 was a pivotal moment in this transformation. Widespread allegations of fraud in that month's parliamentary elections pushed the Russian population into the streets and the online public sphere, sparking the largest mass protests since the early 1990s. Russian opposition forces and intellectual elites were able to mobilize large rallies in Moscow and smaller protests across the country, with participants decrying electoral abuses and calling for an end to Putin's rule.

Shut out by the mainstream media, the organizers of this "winter of discontent" turned to comparatively unobstructed Internet-based media and to social media to boost engagement, coordinate protest rallies, and provide evidence of protest numbers, which the state media tended to downplay. A "war of frames" emerged between state-controlled media and independent sources around the potential impact of the protests (Oates and Lokot 2013). While state-run news channels admitted only that citizens were dissatisfied with the political process, most independent private media and Internet-based sources were far more critical of the regime.

The Kremlin grew increasingly worried about the Internet's destabilizing potential following these events. It went to considerable lengths to wrest control of the digital space away from diverse private actors and to centralize internet governance, media censorship, and content regulation. Roskomnadzor – the Russian government's regulatory body overseeing the Internet, media, and telecommunications – took on a more prominent role in enforcing rules and restrictions. A host of new laws limiting foreign ownership of media and policing online speech, as well as recent legislation aimed at securing greater control over national internet infrastructure, exemplifies this push for consolidation of state control.

17.8 New Restrictions on Media Freedom and Online Expression

Spooked by the unrest, Russian authorities quickly approved a series of repressive regulations aimed at further restricting media freedom and stifling free expression online. Criminal defamation was reintroduced in a law adopted in 2012, providing for large fines or weeks of forced labor as punishment. Another restrictive law that came into force in 2012 granted unprecedented blocking powers to Russian telecommunications regulator Roskomnadzor and other state bodies (Rothrock 2012). Still another 2012 federal law mandated the creation of a "blacklist" registry of websites that disseminated allegedly illegal or otherwise harmful material. Websites

could be added to the blacklist extrajudicially, and critics worried the new measures would be used to directly censor online content (ibid.).

Alongside restrictions aimed at impeding the role of the Internet as an alternative source of news and a space for debate, the Kremlin further expanded its efforts to control independent media outlets. In typical fashion, this was achieved primarily through the transfer of media ownership, as well as through indirect political pressure. An example of the latter came in January 2014, when Dozhd, one of the few independent television channels in Russia to openly cover the 2011 protests, faced state pressure over a controversial audience poll about the siege of Leningrad during World War II that asked viewers whether Soviet authorities should have surrendered Leningrad to the Germans to save hundreds of thousands of lives. After multiple complaints and an investigation, the channel was removed from Russian cable networks and forced to abandon its broadcasting studio, temporarily moving to a private apartment to continue broadcasting online.

Such developments were not limited to broadcast media. In March 2014, Russia's top news website, Lenta.ru, lost its editor-in-chief, Galina Timchenko, who was fired by owner Aleksandr Mamut after repeated warnings from Russian censors; Timchenko was replaced by a pro-Kremlin editor with experience at a pro-Kremlin internet publication. This personnel change at the top led to mass resignations among Lenta.ru's staff, who went on to found Meduza, a new independent media outlet based in Latvia, with Timchenko at the helm. Meduza began work in October 2014 and quickly gained popularity for its Russia-focused reporting and investigations. Alongside Dozhd, Meduza regularly covers issues that receive little to no coverage in state-run media, including corruption, attacks on free speech, domestic violence, and Russia's involvement in international conflicts.

Several new media laws have created challenges for these and other independent media outlets. These laws impose high penalties on newsrooms and journalists for violating "anti-extremist" regulations (discussed further below) and set limits on the share of foreign ownership in media companies (Wijermars and Lehtisaari 2020). The business daily *Vedomosti*, jointly owned by three Western publishing houses, was sold to Russian media entrepreneur Demyan Kudryavtsev in 2015, ahead of a new law prohibiting foreign entities from owning more than 20 percent of Russian media companies; the chief editor was replaced two years later. In 2020, the newspaper changed hands once again. The new editor-in-chief, Andrei Shmarov, was accused of censoring articles critical of Putin's constitutional reforms and investigations into state oil giant Rosneft; several editors resigned in protest.

A similar fate befell the online business news outlet RBC, owned by oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov, which faced pressure in May 2016 after reporting on corruption among Putin-friendly elites as part of the Panama Papers investigation. Its editorial team was ousted, and the new editors caused a scandal in July 2016 by

introducing “new rules” for acceptable reporting and “double white lines” that RBC’s journalists could not cross; details of the editorial meeting were soon leaked to the media. Such self-censorship complemented the legal restrictions, further limiting independent reporting.

17.9 The Rise of New Russian Media

To fill the void left by the crackdown on Russia’s increasingly fragile media sphere, new independent outlets emerged. Some, like Meduza, operated in exile, while others resorted to crowdfunding to keep their operations afloat. This period also saw the significant diversification of the independent media sector and the emergence of advocacy-oriented outlets. MediaZona, founded by members of the feminist protest and art collective Pussy Riot, began shining a light on Russia’s labyrinthine prison system in 2013. Takie Dela started reporting on human rights, social issues, and charity work in 2015. The second half of the 2010s was also characterized by the proliferation of outlets focused on regional and local reporting, such as Holod, Batenka.ru, 7x7, and Bumaga.

A number of new investigative media projects specializing in anticorruption investigations and open-source intelligence also emerged during this period, including *The Insider*, *Proekt*, *Otkrytye Media*, and *Vazhnye Istorii* (IStories). Their sleuthing, in turn, has faced tough competition from nonjournalist civic organizations doing similar anticorruption work, such as Alexei Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation. Navalny’s slickly produced video blockbusters targeting the illicit wealth of top Kremlin officials and oligarchs have racked up millions of views on YouTube and made Navalny and his allies the prime targets of Kremlin ire.

These innovative independent newsrooms had to compete for attention with emerging popular Kremlin-friendly media tabloids such as *LifeNews*, as well as the Byzantine network of anonymous channels publishing political commentary, conspiracy theories, and insider leaks on Telegram, Russia’s most popular messaging platform (Lokot 2018; Klishin 2020).

To keep up with the changing media landscape and to capitalize on the growing role of information-sharing online, the Russian state also hastened to reform its own media assets. In 2013, a presidential decree liquidated two of Russia’s oldest state-media institutions, the state-owned news agency RIA Novosti (established in 1941) and the Kremlin’s international radio station, Voice of Russia (founded in 1929). In their place emerged the new international media holding Rossiia Segodnia, or Russia Today. This new entity, headed by fervently pro-Kremlin TV anchor Dmitry Kiselev, was branded by critics as an even more powerful state “propaganda machine” (in the words of liberal website editor Roman Fedoseev, as quoted by Stephen Ennis [2013]). It also incorporated RT, the state-funded foreign-language TV station led by

Margarita Simonyan, which was formerly known as *Russia Today* (hence the name of the new company).

The proliferation of state efforts to usurp media audiences in both traditional and online media spaces is evidence of the Kremlin's growing realization that it is no longer enough to retain control of national broadcast media alone. The diversification of Russians' media consumption habits and the relatively low bar for creation of successful digital media operations have led Russian regulators and officials to seek pervasive control of both national media and the Internet.

17.10 The Perfection of Control

Kremlin control over the media expanded still further in the late 2010s and early 2020s, as control over digital media and communications became part of a national governance and security agenda. Driving this change was further dramatic growth in internet penetration – up from 43 percent in 2010 to 85 percent in 2020 (ITU 2021). As this chapter was written, some 42 and 39 percent of Russians, respectively, received their news from social media and internet news sites (Levada Center 2021).

Key legislative changes have contributed to the further normalization of state censorship in digital spaces, targeting media outlets, NGOs, and private citizens. These include an infamous “bloggers’ law” that required popular bloggers with more than 3,000 daily views to register with the state and disclose their personal information; a law creating a state-run list of “organizers of information distribution” and requiring social networks, portals, and similar sites to register and share certain data with the state; and measures limiting the anonymous use of public wi-fi networks and banning sales of prepaid SIM cards to customers without a state ID.

Some of the most far-reaching censorship- and surveillance-oriented measures have been adopted in the past several years. These include a data localization law that came into force in 2016, requiring internet companies to store Russian users' data on servers located within Russia. Although some companies (for example, eBay, Booking.com, and Samsung) have complied with the demands, others (such as Facebook and Twitter) have yet to do so and have been fined or threatened with being blocked. The professional social network LinkedIn has been blocked in Russia since 2016 for failing to comply with the legal requirements (Lunden 2016).

Another comprehensive legal tool is an “anti-extremism” package of amendments, which was adopted in the summer of 2016 and took effect in 2018. This includes measures such as increased sentences for the use online of “extremist” language (a designation that state authorities can apply with great discretion), a push for internet companies to share encryption keys with the state and to decrypt user communications, and requirements to store user communications for six months and metadata for up to three years (Luganskaia 2017). In 2018, Russian

censors used these legal grounds to block the Telegram messaging service after it refused to share encryption keys with law enforcement. The attempt proved mostly unsuccessful due to Telegram's sophisticated circumvention efforts and the state's clumsy blocking approach; the ban was lifted in 2020.

Social media content is regularly deleted or blocked on grounds of intolerance or disrespect toward government officials, and users have been fined and even jailed for posting, sharing, or liking content deemed to contain extremist language, calls to mass disorder, or unverified information about public figures. Data from Russia's Supreme Court show that convictions under the extremism charge more than tripled between 2012 and 2017; a large number of these have involved online activity (Gainutdinov and Chikov 2018).

The Kremlin's persistent efforts to gain greater control over online communications and critical expression on the Russian Internet came to a head in 2019 with the implementation of a comprehensive "sovereign Internet" strategy. A set of new regulations and technical upgrades aimed at more autonomy and state control over internet infrastructure, the "sovereign Internet" was presented as a means of protecting Russian cyberspace from external threats (Epifanova 2020). So far, however, it has mostly been used to consolidate control over information flows within Russia's borders, imposing new centrally controlled and less transparent website-blocking mechanisms and targeting opposition websites and social media platforms.

The first half of 2021 saw yet another wave of targeted economic and legal attacks on independent media: Multiple outlets and individual journalists were designated as "foreign agents" by the state. The label applies to those deemed to be "involved in political activity" in the interests of "foreign entities" or "receiving assistance from abroad." Meduza, *The Insider*, and Dozhd have all made the list, along with the US-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. The foreign-agent legislation requires designated organizations and individuals to register with the state, regularly report on their activities, and indicate their foreign-agent status with an obligatory label on any content they distribute, including social media posts (Kartsev 2020). Those labeled have already seen a swift decline in advertising revenues, and a number of independent journalists have left Russia, fearing further persecution. These developments indicate that independent media in Russia are facing an increasingly uncertain and fragile future, even as state-run outlets continue to enjoy government funding.

These ongoing efforts to install tight controls on information flows and news coverage demonstrate the Russian state's push for further control of the media. This now extends across traditional media operations and less formal digital information channels, where state-sponsored propaganda and the censorship of critical voices combine to skew political debate and coverage of elections and social unrest. Some scholars have described this evolving regime as "networked authoritarianism" (Maréchal 2017; Greene 2012), as the state aspires to control political and social life

more tightly, while investing in digital technologies and communications infrastructure. As a result of these efforts, Russians have less access to reliable information and unbiased media coverage. Alternative viewpoints are still available, but increasingly they are restricted to those with a substantial interest in current affairs and a high degree of media sophistication, including those young Russians who are able to navigate obstacles online in search of unbiased information.

17.11 Conclusion

Putin's first two terms in office, from 2000 to 2008, saw the imposition of state control over the most important national broadcast media. Since his return to the presidency in 2012, this control has been expanded in various directions, including most especially online. Although independent voices are still available, to an extent inconceivable during the Soviet period, the space for free expression has steadily shrunk over time. What in 2008 seemed a fragile system of censorship and propaganda today is more all-encompassing, as direct control of the "commanding heights" and indirect control through proxy owners is buttressed by legislation that extends the state into new arenas and imposes sanctions for critical expression.

Time will tell whether this new system contributes to the stability of the Putin regime. The dilemma of authoritarian rule is that censorship deprives not only the general public, but also the autocrat himself of information (Wintrobe 1998). The momentary "perfection" of information control may paradoxically leave the regime blind to destabilizing changes in Russian society. Yet creating space for criticism poses its own risks, as Putin surely remembers from Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*. Either path is a gamble. For now, it seems that Putin has chosen the former.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- DQ1 Were Russian media free and independent in the Boris Yeltsin era? Why or why not?
- DQ2 Compare the relationship between the Russian government and the media under Boris Yeltsin and under Vladimir Putin. What was similar and what was different in these two eras?
- DQ3 What is the role of independent media in authoritarian regimes such as Putin's Russia? Can these media influence the politics of such countries?

EXAM QUESTIONS

- EQ1 How did Russian media change after the collapse of the Soviet Union? Briefly describe the main features of the new media environment under Yeltsin and then Putin.

- EQ2 How did Vladimir Putin try to influence the media early in his presidency? Were these attempts successful?
- EQ3 Explain the main differences between the Soviet system of media control and Vladimir Putin's approach to the media.
- EQ4 What are the dangers and pressures that independent media face under Putin's government? Provide brief examples.

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