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## Media Control as Source of Political Power: Differentiating Reach and Impact

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### Abstract

This article analyses the control of business and state actors over mass media in Russia. First, the most important media sources for political news are identified for the last two decades. While constantly increasing state control is clearly visible for these media, the impact on audiences is more complex. Therefore, second, different forms of media impact on political views of the Russian population are discussed based on a review of related academic studies.

### Introduction

When Boris Yeltsin, Russia's highly unpopular president, managed to win a second term in the presidential elections of 1996, his success was largely attributed to support from influential business magnates, so-called oligarchs, who had used their media assets to support his candidacy. At the time the media holdings of oligarchs became a hot topic for political analysts. It was, therefore, no surprise that Vladimir Putin, when he became Yeltsin's successor in 2000 with the agenda to strengthen state power, started his attack on oligarchs with those who controlled the most important media outlets, namely Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky.

However, their media assets were not brought under direct state control. Instead, Putin initially established a competitive authoritarian regime, in which—according to the definition by Levitsky and Way (2010)—“formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents' abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage vis-à-vis their opponents. [...] Competition is thus real but unfair.”

Accordingly, mass media in Russia remained formally independent. The most important media assets from Gusinsky's Media-Most group, for example, were acquired by the Russian gas company Gazprom, which used the opportunity to create its own media holding. Gazprom is, however, in turn majority controlled by the Russian state. This marked a change in the balance of power between big business and political elites. Under Yeltsin there was “state capture”, i.e. oligarchs dominated politics in order to promote their narrow business interests. Under Putin, analysts increasingly saw “business capture”, i.e. political elites were now putting pressure on private companies to promote their political aims. In line with this development, private control over media assets changed from an instrument of political meddling to—as one manager quipped—“a birth-

day present to the president”. Seen from the perspective of the political leadership, media control was now “outsourced” to private companies in order to maintain a façade of democratic media pluralism.

However, media control is not identical with public support. The Soviet Union was a prime example of this. In Soviet times all media were state owned and subject to direct censorship. They produced a coherent and omnipresent message in support of the Soviet state. However, as soon as free speech was allowed in the late 1980s, this message was ridiculed and largely ignored, indicating that most people had long before stopped believing it. Accordingly, diagnosing media capture by the Russian state is not enough to understand the role of mass media in Russian politics. First, it has to be established how much of the media landscape is at least indirectly controlled by the state. In a second step, the impact of this control needs to be assessed.

### Russian Media as Source of Political News

In order to understand the role of mass media in political power, it is not so much total consumption which matters, but sources of political news. Independent representative surveys of the Russian population conducted by the Levada Center regularly ask people where they “most often get to know news from the country and the world”. Multiple answers are possible. That means the results, presented in Figure 1 on p. 6, reflect all relevant sources of news.

Though the share of TV as a major news provider is in long term decline, in 2020 it is still named by over two thirds of the Russian population as one of the major sources of news. Even more importantly, when asked which source of news they trust most, regularly about half of the population names TV (see Figure 2 on p. 7). As the most important source of political news, national TV stations were the first mass media to be brought under state control after Putin's rise to power. Already by the end of Putin's first term as president all major

TV stations were either state-run or under the control of Gazprom media.

In the 2000s, the other two important groups of mass media named as a source of political news were national newspapers and radio stations, which both reached about a third of the population. At the end of Putin's first term six Russian newspapers with political news reached more than 1% of the population, *Argumenty i Fakty* (18%) and *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (14%) being the most popular, according to a Levada poll. Both were still owned by Yeltsin-era oligarchs, as were most of the less popular national newspapers. At the same time, the most "opposition-friendly" political radio station, *Ekho Moskvy* (reaching 2% of the population), belonged to Gazprom Media, thus providing a rare example of a case in which ownership alone does not determine reporting.

During the 2000s, the internet started to emerge as a major source of news in Russia, first through journalistic websites and later also through social media. While in 2009 less than 10% of the Russian population named the internet as a major source of news, by 2020 journalistic websites and social media were each named by over 40%, with over 20% considering each of them to be especially trustworthy. As Jason Gainous et al. (2018) argue social media became a game changer in Russian politics, strongly contributing to the mobilisation of protesters since the big protest wave of 2011/12.

As the landscape of print as well as online media is much more diverse than in the case of TV stations, the state increased control less dynamically and less visibly. However, a network of oligarchs close to the political leadership around Putin acquired most of the influential Russian print and online media. Grigory Berezkin took over *Komsomolskaya Pravda* in 2006, and a decade later the investigative news platform RBK. Alexander Mamut bought LiveJournal, the most popular platform for personal blogs in 2007, and in 2013 acquired the two most prominent online news media outlets. The owner of the most important social media platform, VKontakte, who had denied data access to the Russian security service, was forced out of the country and lost his company to oligarch Alisher Usmanov in 2014.

In summary, already during his first term Putin managed to get (at least indirect) control over the most popular mass media, in the form of all major national TV stations. Control over other media was increased more incrementally in a process which is still ongoing. It is also important to note that while ownership allows for direct control, including the option to fire critical journalists, other forms of pressure on journalists, ranging from libel cases in court to physical violence, strongly influence media reporting, as they encourage self-censorship.

In line with these developments, indices of media freedom by Reporters without Borders and Freedom House show increasing restrictions on mass media in Russia over the last three decades. However, within the broader trend, there are important differences. To capture them, Toepfl (2020) distinguishes between uncritical, policy-critical, and leadership-critical publics. While only the first shows unquestioned support for the existing political regime and its representatives, the second restricts criticism to specific issues and lower-ranking officials, allowing the leadership to save face and intervene, and only the third public addresses criticism to the country's leadership, thus potentially demanding political change.

Since Putin's first term, national TV has been solidly situated in the uncritical public. At the same time, in print and online media critical publics continue to exist. In Toepfl's assessment "within Russia, as of mid-2017, highly visible [policy-critical] publics could be identified: [...] a range of privately owned news websites, such as *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* or *Kommersant*". Participants in these publics were collectives of professional journalists (who were employed by news organizations whose owners typically had close ties with the Kremlin) and mass audiences of several millions of readers daily." However, the space for policy-critical publics has been shrinking continuously. In 2019, over a dozen journalists left *Kommersant* in protest against censorship. In 2020 a similar story unfolded at *Vedomosti*, another prominent part of the policy-critical public (for more on this see the following article by Esther Somfalvy).

The space for leadership-critical publics has been much more restricted, and journalists in this sphere have been the most likely to face strong state pressure and physical violence. As a result, these publics were smaller and more diverse. As Toepfl summarizes, "In Russia, as of mid-2017, some of these leadership-critical publics constituted themselves in traditional one-to-many mass media environments [like the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* or the internet TV channel *Dozhd/Rain*]. Other leadership-critical publics, by contrast, operated in novel interactive environments, including, for instance, social network site accounts. [...] For instance, one public that operated outside a classic one-to-many environment and did not involve professional journalists as participants [was created by the leadership-critical content [...] published on the Facebook account [...] of Alexey Navalny, Russia's most influential opposition activist, which was followed by approximately 380,000 users in September 2017]."

### Forms of Media Impact

Though media control is important for political influence, the idea that media can easily "brainwash" the audience

is not supported by serious evidence. In her recent study on Russia, for example, Elena Sirotkina argues on the basis of a representative opinion poll that it is not frequency of exposure to information that has an impact, but perceived credibility. Moreover, people tend to avoid the cognitive dissonance caused by media reporting which contradicts their own views. As a result, they tend to consume media which are in line with their worldview. Exposure to alternative views can, in fact, lead to a hardening of their own positions, as they are permanently defended against attacks from the media. For the case of Russia a forthcoming study by Ruben Enikolopov et al. is telling. They offered free access to a pro-opposition online TV channel in Russia and used a randomized field experiment and a pollster to measure the effect of that exposure. The result was stronger polarisation. Those who had been in support of the opposition now felt emboldened and were more outspoken supporters. Those who had been critical of the opposition, in turn, were even more supportive of the existing regime after exposure to the pro-opposition channel. That indicates controlling some media can be used to mobilize supporters, but it is not enough to shift public opinion.

If, however, a critical mass of media promotes the same message, they can also inform political world views. The two most important effects highlighted in media studies are agenda-setting and framing. Agenda-setting means the power of media to influence which issues are being discussed. If during an election campaign the media report a lot about the state of the economy, people are more likely to base their voting decision on economic issues. In times of economic crisis, it would, therefore, be in the interest of politicians in power to shift media reporting to other issues, where they are perceived more favourably by the population.

Similarly, if a new issue emerges media have considerable influence on the public perspective on this issue. Western sanctions after the Ukraine crisis can, for example, be framed as an economic challenge, which will cause concerns about living standards among the audience and doubts about the competence of their political leadership. But sanctions can also be framed as a geopolitical struggle with an aggressive enemy, which is more likely to evoke feelings of patriotism and raise support for the regime. For example, Christina Cottiero et al. (2015) have shown that the framing by Russian TV of the Ukraine crisis as an issue of “fascism” and “American aggression” is reflected in internet search terms used by the Russian population. In such a situation, Sarah Oates (2016) argues it is “not so much who owns or controls the media that is key to understanding information control; rather, it is knowing who is constructing and disseminating the most compelling national narrative that holds the key to power in Russia.”

If, in a next step, there is rather comprehensive control over the media, or at least over those media which inform the majority of the population, this control can be used to cancel out the opposition from public awareness. An analysis of media reporting on Russian presidential elections in 2000 and 2008 by Nozima Akharkhodjaeva (2017) has demonstrated that shift. While in 2000 the programmes of oppositional parties were discussed, though overwhelmingly with a negative bias, in 2008 there was hardly any reference to policy proposals from opposition candidates, as reports in mainstream media focused on their lifestyle and character—of course, again with a negative stance.

In a similar logic, the most prominent oppositional politician of the 2010s, Alexei Navalny, is mostly ignored not only by President Putin, who has never used his name in public speeches, but also by the country’s main TV stations, as an analysis by Anastasia Kazun (2019) shows. She concludes: “In a situation where simply ignoring Navalny is out of the question, while covering him too much even in a negative light can raise the public awareness about him, occasionally running smear items about him can serve as a good compromise.” Similarly, as Rolf Fredheim (2017) has shown in the case of two prominent Russian online media outlets, a shift to pro-regime owners coincided with an editorial shift to lifestyle and human interest subjects, while reporting about controversial legal proceedings was substantially reduced.

For these reasons, Russia has been moving from a competitive authoritarian regime, where competition is real but unfair, to a fully authoritarian regime. In such a regime, the opposition has no access to mainstream media at all (Heinrich/Pleines 2018). Even if comprehensive control over the media has been established, the audience will still not be “brainwashed” about strongly-held beliefs. But these beliefs can be profoundly confused. Several studies have concluded that this is the strategy behind Russian media reporting on controversial issues. Here, the result is not so much the persuasion of opposition supporters, but their demobilisation in face of an avalanche of contradictory information. Moreover, as Carter/Carter (2018) argue, in fully authoritarian states the aim of propaganda is not necessarily to convince people, but to demonstrate the unchallenged strength of the regime, which also has a demobilising effect on opposition supporters.

## Conclusion

With a small number of national TV stations dominating Russian news reporting in terms of reach as well as trust, Putin was able to swiftly gain a leading position by taking over the media assets of two oligarchs. With that, Putin also changed the balance of power in

his favour. While under his predecessor politicians had courted oligarchs in order to get their support, Putin was soon in a position where he could outsource media control to loyal allies. An increasing number of print and online media have been taken over by oligarchs close to the Kremlin. However, establishing fuller control of the media landscape was a more incremental process, which became much more complicated with the emergence of news websites and social media.

As a result, the Russian state has so far not established full discursive hegemony. Moreover, even full con-

trol over media reporting does not allow one to simply switch the world views and political alignment of the population. Instead, media control is used by the political leadership to shift the attention of supporters and the larger unengaged public to topics which show it in a more favourable light. Moreover, strong dominance over media reporting is increasingly used to discourage the disappointed from mobilising.

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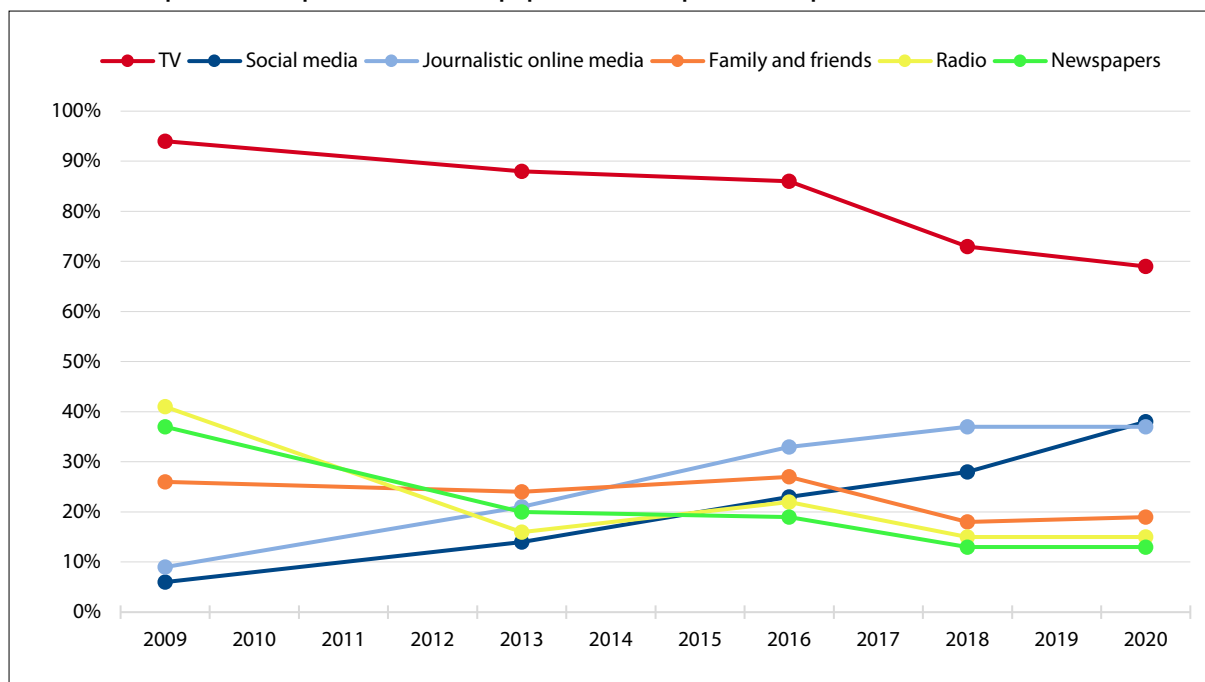
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## OPINION POLL

## Preferred News Sources of the Russian Population

**Figure 1: Where Do You Most Often Get to Know News from the Country and the World?**  
(representative poll of the Russian population, multiple answers possible)

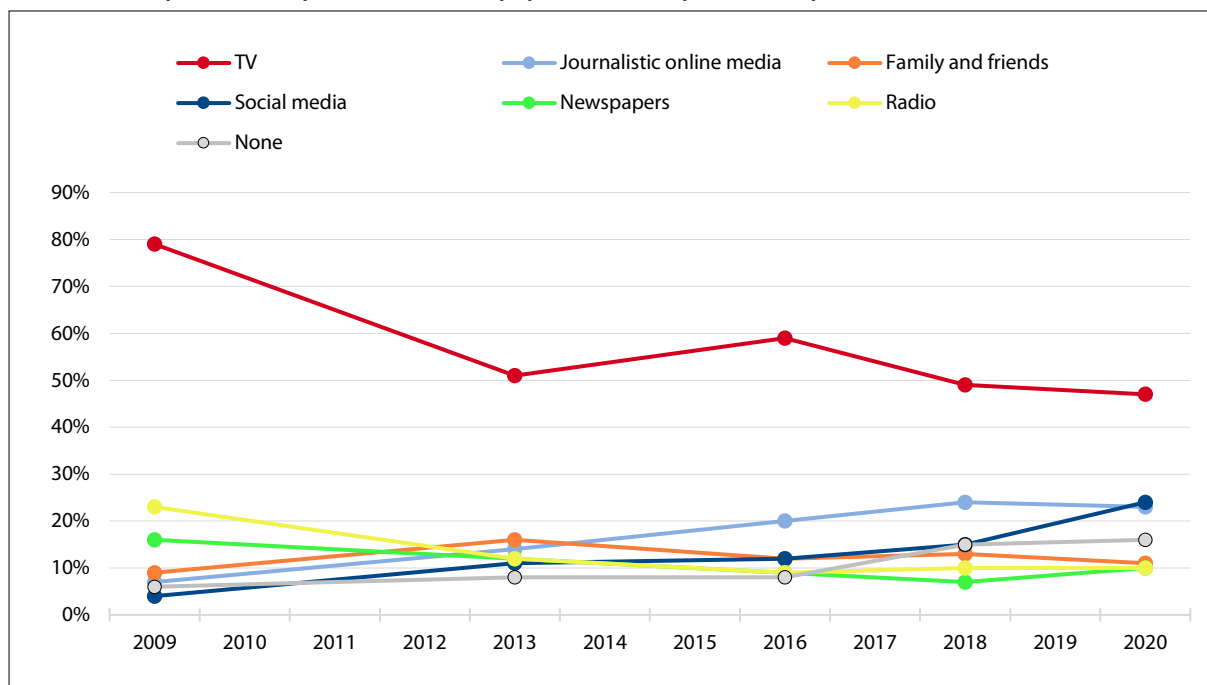


	2009	2013	2016	2018	2020
TV	94%	88%	86%	73%	69%
Social media	6%	14%	23%	28%	38%
Journalistic online media	9%	21%	33%	37%	37%
Family and friends	26%	24%	27%	18%	19%
Radio	41%	16%	22%	15%	15%
Newspapers	37%	20%	19%	13%	13%

Note: Answers mentioned by less than 10% of respondents in all years were not included. All polls were conducted in the summer of the respective year (June, July or August).

Source: Data provided by the Levada Center.

**Figure 2: Which Sources of Information for News from the Country and the World Do You Trust Most?**  
(representative poll of the Russian population, multiple answers possible)



	2009	2013	2016	2018	2020
TV	79%	51%	59%	49%	47%
Journalistic online media	7%	14%	20%	24%	23%
Family and friends	9%	16%	12%	13%	11%
Social media	4%	11%	12%	15%	24%
Newspapers	16%	12%	9%	7%	10%
Radio	23%	12%	9%	10%	10%
None	6%	8%	8%	15%	16%

*Note: Answers mentioned by less than 10% of respondents in all years were not included. All polls were conducted in the summer of the respective year (June, July or August).*

*Source: Data provided by the Levada Center.*

## Shrinking Niches for Independent Journalism: The Case of Vedomosti

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### Abstract

In Summer 2020 all leading editorial staff of the business newspaper Vedomosti resigned in protest over the appointment of a new editor-in-chief after the alleged interference of its main creditor, Rosneftbank. In this article, I summarize the chain of events that led to the mass walkout and highlight the context in which it took place. What happened at Vedomosti is one incident in a line of similar ones in a changing media landscape, in which niches for independent reporting are shrinking and journalists have to compromise, adapt, or find new outlets for their reporting.

### Vedomosti: Ownership Change Leads to New Editorial Policy

On 15 July 2020, all leading editorial staff of the newspaper Vedomosti resigned in protest to the appointment of Andrey Shmarov as editor-in-chief. Shmarov had been installed as acting editor-in-chief by Ivan Yerechin, who had recently bought the paper's parent company, Business News Media holding (BNM). He had also from the start been in conflict with the Vedomosti staff, who accused the new editor-in-chief of censorship and of being at odds with the paper's reporting standards.

Vedomosti, known as one of Russia's top business newspapers, was founded in 1999 by an international consortium comprised of the media companies Dow Jones (Wall Street Journal), Pearson (Financial Times) and the Finnish company Sanoma as owner of Independent Media (Moscow Times). Vedomosti's foreign owners sold their shares to poet and media manager Demyan Kudryavtsev in 2015 (and his holding "Arkan Invest" with his business partners Vladimir Voronov and Martin Pompadour), shortly after the passage of a law that forbade foreign ownership of Russian media. The appointment of Andrey Shmarov in March 2020 came amidst negotiations around selling the company to Konstantin Zyatkov of Nasha Versiya publishing house and Alexey Golubovich of the investment firm Arbat Capital. Both bidders eventually withdrew their offers and BNM was sold to Yerechin instead (for reporting on the ownership structure of Vedomosti over time see Meduza, 12.05.2020). According to investigations from Meduza, The Bell, Vedomosti and Forbes, Kudryavtsev had financed the acquisition of BNM with a loan from Gazprombank that was later refinanced with a loan from Rosneft's Russian Regional Development Bank. Based on these alleged financial ties, some observers suspect that Rosneft had a hand in the appointment of Shmarov (Rosneft's press secretary Mikhail Leontiev denies these claims) (Malkova / Mironenko, 12.05.2020).

Regardless of what led to Shmarov's appointment, open conflict with the editorial staff broke out almost immediately thereafter. Shmarov offended the Vedomosti staff by declaring that he himself did not read the paper, and was unimpressed by the editorial policy that was a source of pride for its employees (Malkova / Mironenko, 16.06.2020). Beyond such personal snubs, allegations of censorship were made, for example after Shmarov started changing article headers, made sure an article about Rosneft's chairman Igor Sechin was deleted and declared that material from the polling company "Levada Center" was not to be published anymore (Otkrytie Media, 22.04.2020). After these conflicts, it was not surprising that the permanent appointment to the position of editor-in-chief was not well-received among the staff.

The editors at Vedomosti had suggested another candidate for the post, former editor Anfisa Voronina, who they deemed to be more suitable than a candidate they saw as "alien to journalistic principles", as they put it in a letter to the new owners (Meduza, 31.03.2020). After the board elected Shmarov in a 4-2 vote, the five deputy editors-in-chief quit in protest on 15 June 2020. Dimitri Simakov, Alexander Gubski, Boris Safranov, Filipp Stepkin und Kirill Kharatyan were the five top editorial staff of Vedomosti in charge of operations. All of them had been long-time staff members, already on board before the foreign owners had to sell the newspaper in 2015. In their walkout they were joined by the acting head of the online issue and the head of the business desk. Even before the events of June 2020, other journalists had signalled their disapproval through resignation. In an open letter published in April 2020, the editors had already criticized Shmarov's new editorial policy, claiming it was not in line with the standards upheld at Vedomosti and that it would change the paper into a servile version of itself under the same label (Vedomosti, 23.04.2020). Leaving Vedomosti was then the logical consequence of his permanent appointment.



The mass walkout caused a stir within the Russian media landscape, as Vedomosti had been setting standards across the industry. Commentators saw this as a fatal blow to the publication, and suggested that attempts to get rid of the critical and independent journalists would not be possible without a loss of talent (Malkova / Mironenko, 16.06.2020). It is also noteworthy that, as the commentators remark, the fate of Vedomosti is not an isolated incident, but only one more case of disappearing spaces for critical and high-level investigative journalism.

### **Embattled Newsrooms, Shrinking Spaces**

Observers of the events at Vedomosti felt reminded of previous cases where journalistic outlets that had been known for investigative journalism came under pressure from the authorities, which led to the firing or voluntary departure of editors or the closing of outlets (it is not always clear whether someone was fired or if they pre-empted their firing by resigning). The non-exhaustive list of newsrooms that came under pressure in the past 10 years includes those of TV channels (Dozhd.tv, REN TV, TV2), newspapers (Vedomosti, Kommersant, Forbes) and online publications (Lenta.ru; Grani.ru, Gazeta.ru), entire media holdings (RMG) and a news agency (RIA Novosti). It is noteworthy that this “reining in” of newsrooms often took place through the owners of the media companies, while interference by state authorities often remained indirect, and that the process was dynamic and subtle (for a general description of this process see Pleines in this issue). For example, in 2014, the online publication *Lenta.ru* was investigated by the consumer protection bureau “Roskomnadzor” for an interview it published with a leader of the Ukrainian nationalist “right sector” on allegations of promoting extremism. The warning by the authorities led to the firing of editor-in-chief Galina Timtshenko and of many other staff members (Ekho Moskv, 12.05.2014). As a consequence, about 80 employees quit in solidarity, while Timtshenko was replaced by an editor from a pro-Kremlin news site. Timtshenko and others later started the exile medium *Meduza*, based in Latvia.

In 2019, two journalists of the newspaper “Kommersant” lost their jobs after they wrote an article about the pending replacement of the Federation Council’s chairperson Valentina Matvienko. While the director general of Kommersant cites the violation of professional standards as the reason for the firing, one of the fired journalists was sure that Matvienko had complained about the article to the owner, Alisher Usmanov, and that this was the true reason behind their firing (Novaya Gazeta, 20.05.2019). Eleven other journalists quit in solidarity, while over 100 other Kommersant staff signed an open letter stating that political reporting was not possible

in Russia for the foreseeable future: “The Kommersant team feels obliged to inform its readers that Kommersant will not be able to inform them about Russian policy for an indefinite period of time. Readers, partners and advertisers of Kommersant Publishing House will be deprived of quality and unbiased coverage of a number of domestic political events” (Chernykh, 20.05.2019).

A third example concerns the fate of the RBC Media holding owned at that time by oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov. The medium was famous for investigative formats, including coverage connected to the Panama Papers. In 2016, one of three editors was suddenly let go, while the other two quit. They were replaced by two editors who had formerly worked at the news agency Tass. While the exact cause of the dismissal is not clear, it is likely that it was connected to the reporting that often came into the crosshairs of those in power, e.g. stories about the origin of their wealth.

From the literature we know that in media markets that remain somewhat pluralistic, journalists faced with an editorial policy (or pressures to self-censor) can always decide to look for work elsewhere, somewhere where editorial policy is more in line with their moral code. Moreover, there is an understanding among journalists that more “important” media (e.g. those with higher reach) have less freedom from interferences than print outlets, smaller organizations, and more specialized or online media. As control extends over more types of media outlets, the opportunities for moving on become fewer. Hence, it is telling that Novaya Gazeta at that time saw the fate of RBC as a clear sign that niches for independent journalism were shrinking, as control was extended beyond TV with its large audience to the much smaller print and online publications (Martinov, 13.05.2016).

### **“Solid Double Lines” in Reporting and Self-Censorship**

After they were brought in to replace the editors-in-chief at RBC, the new editors Elizaveta Golikova and Igor Trosnikov held a noteworthy meeting in which they spoke about their new guidelines for journalistic work that was later leaked. The editors compared reporting to participating in traffic, where “driving over a solid double line” was also punished. Rules in journalism, they implied, just like traffic rules, protect both those driving in cars [the journalist] and the pedestrians [the public?]. What also became clear from the exchange was—and here the limits of the traffic rules-analogy were most visible—that nobody knew where the “solid double line” was supposed to be located, and that in fact the line was “always moving” (*Meduza*, 08.06.2016). This exchange reflects how pressure in newsrooms is relayed in practice: while everybody assumes that some rules exist regarding what is permissible to write with-

out prompting a crackdown, these rules are by no means clear. Such red lines are often communicated euphemistically to the journalists, who then have to interpret them within their specific context. This might then lead to misinterpretations. This was the case at the RBC newsroom, where the traffic rules analogy leaves room for interpretation of who exactly was meant by the “pedestrians” that were also to be protected. Furthermore, as seen in the case of RBC, they sometimes emerge after the reporting has already taken place, when an owner or powerful state official takes offence and intervenes (Zeveleva 2020). Consequently, journalists attempting to manage these pressures to self-censor always operate under uncertainty.

### How Can Journalists React to the Pressures to Self-Censor That Media Owners Levy on Them?

What could journalists do in reaction to the pressures they face when pursuing independent reporting? The literature suggests that many journalists react with conformism and self-censorship which is, furthermore, often internalized and not perceived as self-censorship at

all by those engaging in it (Kohut 2009, Koltsova 2006, Schimpfössl / Yablokov 2014). This is what one journalist claims is the take-home message of the developments in Russia: Working well is bad, quality does not matter, and the only thing that keeps you safe is not to quarrel with anyone in a high position (Saprykin, 14.05.2016). Other reactions might be to rationalize these pressures as being part of normal editorial processes, or to test the limits of what is permissible to write. However, as discussed before, toeing the line may be difficult if the line of acceptable writing constantly moves. Yet other journalists attempt to resist censorship instead of adjusting their reporting to it. The past decade is full of examples of mass resignations from embattled newsrooms like the ones discussed in this text, and most of the journalists who were let go did find other employment in their field. The fact that critical investigative journalism has been relegated to ever smaller niches, while TV stations, major newspapers and online media are brought under increasing control by the state has prompted those journalists who are critical of the regime to move to independent, self-owned media and blogs.

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## Social Media in Russia: Between State and Society

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### Abstract

Social media in Russia exists in a state of flux between the increasing state control on the one hand and the tradition of free online communication in the country on the other. Despite the risks free online spaces might constitute to the stability of the regime, the state continues to tolerate them, as they also provide a number of benefits for the regime, such as citizen feedback, illusion of democracy and a way to vent people's anger.

### Introduction

Over the last decades, the Russian social media landscape has developed into a fragmented field in which global social media platforms and messengers such as Facebook, Google and WhatsApp compete with their Russia-based competitors such as VK.ru, Yandex and Telegram. This is a rather unique situation worldwide: even when countries have their own social media platforms, these are either not that popular, or, as in China, global platforms are not allowed on the market to compete freely with domestic social networks. As of 2019, the most popular social media platform in Russia was YouTube (87% of user share in the country), followed by VK.ru (83%), WhatsApp (69%), Instagram (56%) and Odnoklassniki (54%). Facebook was ranked only 7<sup>th</sup> in this rating, after the Russia-based messenger Viber (Statista 2020).

These platforms have different coverage user profiles and constitute in essence large filter bubbles for different social milieus of Russian society. Thus, Odnoklassniki ('Classmates') has a reputation of being a social network for elderly people, with depoliticised content, Facebook is often seen as a bulwark of liberal intellectuals, and Telegram is used both by pro-state and oppositional actors to follow the other's behind-the-scenes actions. Over time, users migrate from one social network to another, and the images of the platforms transform accordingly. Thus, Twitter, which used to be popular for political content in the beginning of 2010s, in recent years has given way to Instagram, which has become a forum not only for celebrity gossip, but also for political discussions. In this fragmented landscape, different social media platforms play specific roles, both for the state and for civil society. In this article, I will briefly outline the previous development of Russian political communication on social media and assess the status quo in this tug-of-war between state and society.

### In the Beginning Was Freedom

Until the 2010s, online communication in Russia remained largely unregulated, while media law for

traditional media was already rather restrictive. As a result, RuNet (Russian Internet) has developed into a rather free space with a well-developed political blogosphere. In the late 2000s, a research team at the Berkman Centre for Internet & Society mapped the Russian political blogosphere and found that the online "news diets" of Russian bloggers were more independent and oppositional than that of the average Russian Internet user (Etlings et al. 2010). These results were indirectly confirmed by Koltsova and Shchetbak (2015), who explored political postings of the top 2000 bloggers of the LiveJournal blogging platform gathered in 2011 and 2012 and concluded that "Russian blogs performed the role of a media 'stronghold' of the political opposition" (Koltsova and Shchetbak 2015, p. 1). Despite this evidence of the oppositional character of the Russian political blogosphere, many scholars at the end of 2000s expressed doubt regarding the democratizing potential of the RuNet. Sarah Oates in her book "Revolution Stalled" wrote that "until December 2011, there was little compelling evidence that the Internet had made a significant difference in Russian mainstream politics" (Oates 2013, p. 1).

The protest movement 'For fair elections' in 2011–2012 proved these estimations wrong. It began as a reaction to cases of election fraud, which were documented by citizens and spread via social media. According to many scholars, social media, in particular Facebook, played a significant role in mobilizing the protesters (Bodrunova and Litvinenko 2013, Kluyeva 2016, Denisova 2017). In his study of protest communities on Facebook and V Kontakte, Panchenko concluded that despite the small number of users of Facebook in Russia compared to the Russian social network VK, the audience of the protest communities on FB was twice as big as that of VK (Panchenko 2012). Protesters used online tools for self-organization, for voting for speakers at the rallies, and for organizing single-person protests.

## The State Strikes Back

In the years prior to 2012, communication of the state on social networks was rather scarce and was mostly limited to blogging of governmental officials. As Toepfl (2012) wrote, it was then-President Dmitry Medvedev's use of new digital technologies that made many other officials start their own blogs. Toepfl examined the content of blogs of regional leaders and concluded that these blogs played "a far greater role in generating legitimacy for the Russian political system than they do in democracies, because the semi-authoritarian Russian system lacks other mechanisms which generate (input) legitimacy in developed democracies" (Toepfl, 2012, p. 1435). Bode and Makarychev compared the content of opposition and pro-government bloggers in 2011–2012 and found that pro-state blogging was used by state officials as a "depoliticizing [tool] meant to decrease the degree of—and space for—political expression" (Bode und Makarychev 2013, p. 55).

Toepfl also analyzed the ways in which the government dealt with scandals spread via social media using the example of two case studies of scandals that emerged and evolved on social media. He concluded that traditional pro-state media "played a crucial role not only in the outbreak but also in the framing of the two scandals" (Toepfl 2011, p. 1313). These studies showed that the state was trying out different mechanisms of co-optation of social media even before the third term of Putin's presidency.

After the protests of 2011–2012, the government became aware of the mobilizing potential of online media and implemented a series of restrictive Internet laws. The most prominent of them was the so-called "Yarovaya-package" of 2016, which obliged Internet providers to store all data for half a year and introduced stricter punishment for reposting of "pro-terrorist" or "extremist" content. In 2019, several new laws marked a milestone in the development of Internet control in Russia, the laws against "fake news" and "disrespect" of governmental officials online, as well as the so-called "Sovereign Internet" bill. The latter obliged providers to install state monitoring tools, which grants the state even more control over online content.

As Vendil Pallin notes, "most laws are not systematically implemented and by no means all opposition content that is posted on the Internet leads to legal or other actions from the authorities" (Vendil Pallin 2017, p. 17). These laws have, however, had a remarkable effect on society, namely in terms of increase of self-censorship among media professionals as well as among average Internet users (Bodrunova et al., 2020).

Alongside these restrictive measures, the government has been increasingly using co-optation strategies to pro-

mote its agenda through social media. For instance, it is known that paid trolls are used to promote pro-state discourse as well as to defame opposition. In addition, as studies have shown (Zavadski and Toepfl 2018; Daucé 2017), the Russia-based search engine Yandex employs algorithms that lead to reinforcement of pro-state narratives.

## "Be Like Water": Civil Society Keeps Finding Free Spaces Online

Although the state has learned to use social media for its own purposes, free online spaces have not ceased to exist. On the one hand, the tradition of free online communication in Russia seems to be hard to erase. On the other hand, free communication spaces can be of interest to the regime (Toepfl 2020, Stockmann 2013). They might serve as feedback mechanisms for the state, which are essential in the absence of normally-functioning opinion polls. It can also give people an illusion of democratic freedoms and a way to vent their anger. These benefits, however, come with certain risks to the regime (Toepfl 2020).

Thus, YouTube, which has been tolerated by the Russian state, has developed into an alternative to television in Russia, with a prominent oppositional agenda. My research on the most popular political YouTube videos in Russia during the presidential campaign of 2018 has shown that anti-Putin discourse prevailed in the top videos on Russian YouTube. The so-called "Schoolchildren's Protests" of 2017 were triggered by a YouTube video by Alexey Navalny about the alleged corruption of the Prime Minister Medvedev. This video, "He is not Dimon to you", has so far gathered more than 36 million views on YouTube.

Obviously, this social network constitutes a certain risk for the stability of the regime. However, banning the platform, which is highly popular among younger Russians and is a source of income for many citizens, would mean for the government risking an unpredictable wave of protests.

The ban of Telegram, which lasted from 2018 through July 2020, has demonstrated the counterproductiveness of this measure. During its ban, Telegram even increased its number of Russian users, and has become an important arena for oppositional talk, leaks, and coordination of protests. The government began to involve itself in Telegram and to manipulate anonymous news channels in its interests (Rubin 2018). As a result, the Russian segment of Telegram resembles a big bazaar of leaks, rumours and compromising materials, where it is hardly possible to orient oneself. Many respondents in my recent study on anonymous news channels on Telegram, which I conducted together with Anna Smolyarova, admitted that they ceased to follow politics on Tele-

gram because they were overwhelmed with the amount of unreliable information there.

### And the Winner Is...?

In 2019, two notable cases showed that despite the control tools the state has at its disposal, the power of social media can still challenge state authorities in Russia. The first case was the arrest of the investigative reporter of news portal *Meduza* Ivan Golunov. He was detained in Summer 2019 for alleged drug dealing. A wave of solidarity that started on social media under the hashtag #ЯМыИванГолунов (#IWeIvanGolunov) made the authorities withdraw the fabricated accusation. The second case was that of the student Yegor Zhukov, who was detained during the Moscow protests alongside with other protesters. Thanks to a large support campaign organised via multiple social media platforms, he was not imprisoned.

Social media has also been used by protesters in numerous local protests of recent years. For instance, in August 2020, the defenders of Kushtau mountain in Bashkortostan managed to stream their protest via social media despite local blocking of Internet connection. During the Covid-19 lockdown, users invented a new way to express their protest: the so-called “online rallies” on Yandex-maps, where people usually share traffic information. Citizens posted comments critical of the government on map locations in front of city administrations. The comments were soon deleted, but this showed how inexhaustible and creative users are in adopting new methods of using social media to voice their discontent.

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The use of social media by citizens has among others one particularly important ‘side effect’: people learn to hold those in charge accountable. A study by Kamilla Nigmatullina and myself (Litvinenko and Nigmatullina 2020) on local media freedom in 33 Russian regions showed that VK public pages of local news outlets are usually full of critical comments. One small anecdote perfectly illustrates the relationship between officials and citizens in regard to social media: In 2019, administrations of the Russian regions had to implement a social media monitoring system “Incident Management”. Local authorities were obliged to monitor and react to critical comments of citizens on social media. People very soon understood that posting a comment online was a quite effective way to complain about any shortcoming in the city. As a result, citizens have become more demanding and now expect immediate response from city administration. At the same time, public relations specialists working with the system reported that they were overwhelmed with the increase in workload that came with this monitoring and giving feedback to the citizens.

This example shows that, although the state has tools of control over social media at its disposal, it still cannot enjoy the benefits of online communication without taking certain risks. The state is forced to deal with the free nature of bottom-up communication and tolerate a certain amount of Internet freedom, which means that the window of opportunity for political dissent in the country remains open.

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